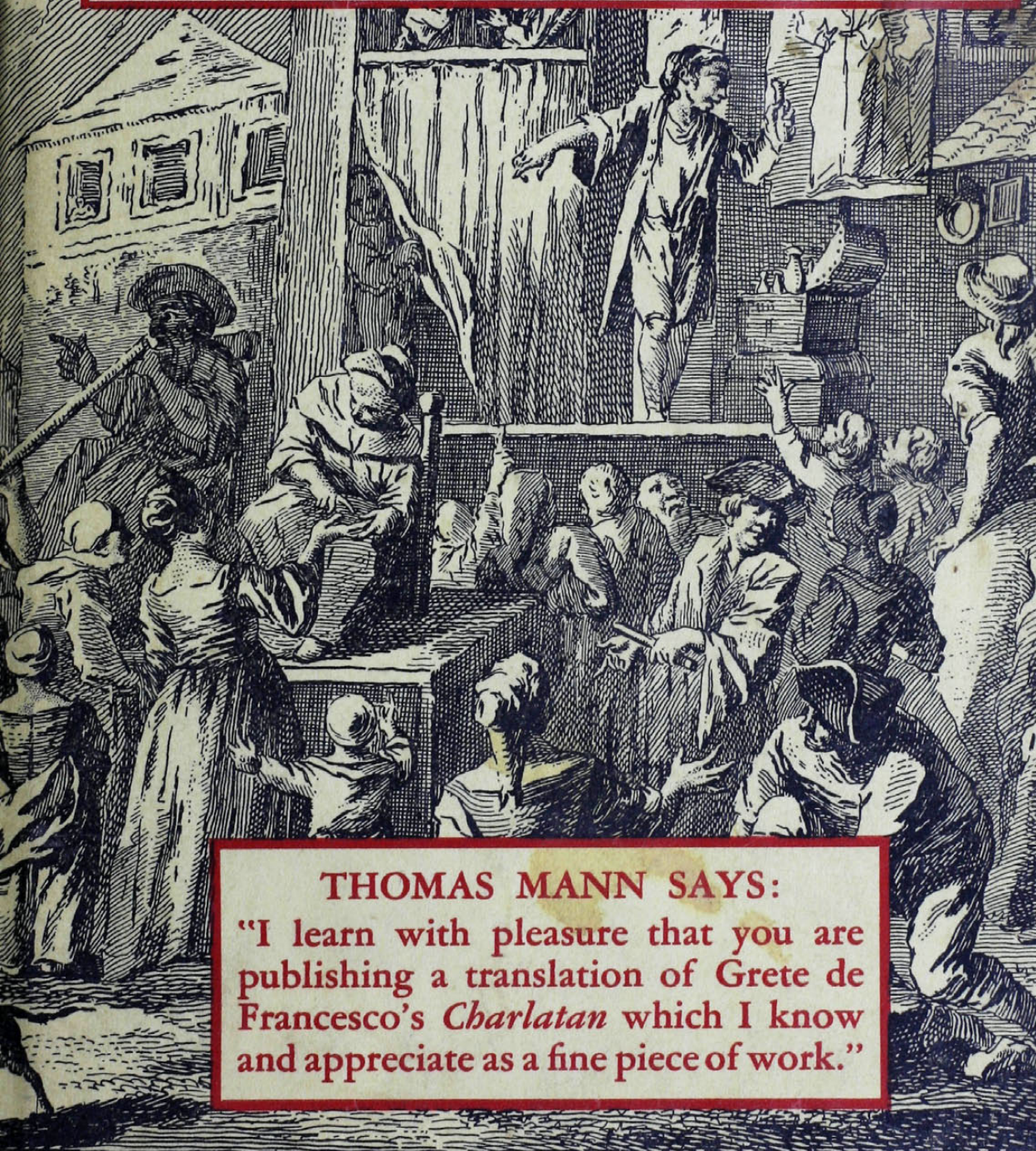


# THE POWER OF THE CHARLATAN

GRETE DE FRANCESCO

TRANSLATED BY MIRIAM BEARD



THOMAS MANN SAYS:

"I learn with pleasure that you are publishing a translation of Grete de Francesco's *Charlatan* which I know and appreciate as a fine piece of work."



As in Thomas Mann's *Mario the Magician*, there is more in this book than the story of the medicine man, the hypnotist, and the expert at shell games. The author writes of a galaxy of quacks in medieval and modern Europe and in America; men who like "Chevalier" John Taylor offered to help failing eyesight and blinded hundreds of people; like Bragadino who was called to Venice when its leaders felt themselves unable to compete with the upstart trading countries by hard work and therefore asked the help of a man who could manufacture gold for them. The charlatan always, as the author writes, "was the foe of education, of anything that could disturb the uniform ignorance of the mass; in the place of education he offered propaganda." The quack feeds on human misery. He does business best when people are suffering, when they are hopeless, or rather have only the hope of a miracle to right their fortunes. He has to be intolerant, and he has to promise his crowds their heart's desire.

Grete de Francesco is a newspaper writer whose book was recently published in Switzerland and, curiously enough, had excellent reviews in Germany. It has been translated by Miriam Beard, who has also written certain sections on American quackery.









A MOUNTEBANK UNMASKED



De Francesco

# The Power of the CHARLATAN

By

Grete de Francesco

Translated from the German by  
Miriam Beard

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I

THE CHARLATAN:  
THE MAN AND HIS POWER





# THE POWER OF THE CHARLATAN

## The Word "Charlatan," Its Origin and Application

MYSTERY is essential to the impostor. Above everything else, the charlatan must avoid straightforward reasoning and simplicity of expression: too clear and direct a light would quickly destroy the spell he exerts, through eloquent ambiguity, over his victims. In all ages, the voice of the humbug has exercised a peculiar fascination—it is his chief weapon. But though he has to speak and write continuously, his announcements are best couched in indefinite phrases, opaque and susceptible of many interpretations, like the words of Subtle, the alchemist in Ben Jonson's play of that name. Subtle was very likely drawn from life; when Jonson wrote, the adventures of the actual swindler, Simon Forman, who had involved high personages in his activities, were fresh in everyone's mind. Undoubtedly, English audiences recognized the style of Forman in the obscure mutterings of Jonson's wizard, and felt some sympathy for the protest of Surly, the skeptic: "What a brave language is this? Next to canting?" No honest man, thought Surly, would so persistently avoid the intelligible:

. . . *Alchemie* is a pretty kind of Game,  
Somewhat like Tricks o' the Cards, to cheat a man,  
With charming. . . . What else are all your *Terms*,  
Whereon no one o' your writers 'grees with other? . . .  
Your Oyle of height, your Tree of Life, your Blood . . .  
Your *Toade*, your *Crow*, your *Dragon* . . .  
And worlds of other strange *Ingredients*  
Would burst a man to name.

The "terms" to which Surly objected are the charlatan's stock in trade. But the word "charlatan" is also a dubious term. Any attempt to trace and define it leads us at once into that twilit

region of dissolving contours where the man himself prefers to live.

"Charlatan" comes from the Italian word *ciarlatano*. A *ciarlatano*, as the leading dictionary of the Italian language, the *Vocabolario della Crusca*, informs us in its sober way, is "one who sells salves or other drugs in public places, pulls teeth and exhibits tricks of legerdemain." The striking feature of this definition is its association of legerdemain with the ordinary business of peddling. But this does not greatly sharpen our vague conception of a charlatan. Cannot a man who does not extract teeth in a public place be a charlatan as well? The *Vocabolario* gives a clearly formulated but not entirely satisfactory answer by saying that the word *ciarlatano* was early used in a figurative sense, being applied to other types of men who "with a superfluity of artificial words, with boasting and deception endeavored to pass the false for the genuine and turn the credulity of their fellow men to profit." What began as a narrow technical term was thus gradually broadened into a word of embracing general significance. Evidently there was something highly symbolic in the methods and behavior of these quacksalvers who paraded their balsams at yearly market fairs and in the public squares. They introduced sleight of hand into the business of selling; they imposed the false for the genuine article by means of speeches characterized by extravagance. Their words, moreover, were *artificiose*, like imitation jewels. Not only the wares of these itinerant vendors were sham: so were their words. The noun *ciarla* itself means empty garrulity, and the verb *ciarlare* is defined as "to speak in a boastful and irresponsible fashion, frequently with the intention of confusing others." All these definitions refer to the charlatan's use of words: he was distinguished primarily by the specious quality of his muddled utterances.

Without directly saying so, the *Vocabolario* accuses the charlatan of falsification, of counterfeiting. The same charge was openly leveled at the quack by an older English work, the *Zootomia, or a Morall Anatomy of the Living by the Dead*, written by a physician, Richard Whitlock, and published in 1654. Calling the England of his time a "Nursery of Charlatans, or Mountebanks," Dr. Whitlock compared charlatans with counterfeiters, declaring them "onely herein worse," that the



latter "corrupt and deface Caesar's Image, but these the Image of God himself."

Counterfeiting, thus early associated with the concept of charlatanry, is of course an art far more ancient than the Italian word: it is as old as the history of invention. Papyrus collections which reveal the highly developed science and technology of the Egyptians and their expert use of glass, metals, and dyes, also report a booming business in counterfeit products. The art of falsification was surrounded from the first by an air of mystery and its technical achievements were handed down in the shape of secret formulas. This union of secrecy and falsification had an economic cause: producers and owners of the genuine articles were relentless in the determination to suppress makers of cheap imitations and drove them into hiding. There was also a psychological motive for furtiveness: the masses are the chief consumers of spurious products, whether jewels and other material goods, or immaterial values like education and culture, and with their meretricious acquisitions they hope to rival the rich and favored few, distinguished by possession of the genuine. But they are anxious to conceal this design from others and hesitate to confess it even to themselves. An atmosphere of the clandestine, accordingly, surrounds the operations of the charlatan who purveys popular shams, who falsifies material and spiritual values to satisfy mass ambitions.

The solemn air of mystery associated with the persons and wares of quacks is well communicated by many prints of the past three centuries, sketches which cannot pretend to the level of high art but portray the life of the common people simply and with primitive zest. One such Roman engraving, made at the end of the eighteenth century (Fig. 1), shows Luigi Pergola, "venditore e manipolatore di Segreti," seller and preparer of secrets. To be sure, "segreto" here refers to the secret remedies for sale, but the artist has hinted at more than this: he intimates that what the quack offers is not a mere private nostrum but Mystery itself, the Unattainable, ready brewed and bottled. The thirst for this divine potion may be read on the upturned faces of his auditors, marked with curiosity and suffering. One shriveled invalid is reaching out with superstitious faith for a touch of the doctor's coat. But the quack, draped in his talismans, has no glance to spare for those below; he holds his book open at a pic-



ture of a cripple, and his mouth is open too—haranguing, as these counterfeits of words have ever harangued, through all the ages.

The *Vocabolario della Crusca* is a relatively modern diction-



1. Luigi Pergola, maker and seller of secret remedies, delivers a wordy tirade to his public.

*Popular Roman print, circa 1800.*

ary (1840) and its definition, concise and good as it may be, reveals the fact that we are separated from these earlier mountebanks by a broad lapse of time. One comes closer to them by listening to their contemporaries in the eighteenth century, the



century of dictionaries, when men were deeply concerned with language and the crystal-clear formulation of concepts. Zedler's *Grosses Universal Lexikon Aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, published in 1733, does not contain the word charlatan, but discusses charlatanry instead: "In itself the word means wind-baggery (*Windmacherey*), that is to say, when a man makes a thing or matter appear big through outward splendor, though it is in itself of no value, because the whole world wishes to be deceived; there are such persons in all walks of life." This writer has emphasized the outward splendor, the skilful make-up and staging, which, to contemporaries, appeared so striking and essential a part of charlatanry. The fact conveyed by the great Leipzig lexicon, that charlatans were not confined to the peddling class but invaded all spheres, is still more strongly stated by Diderot's *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, published in Paris in 1751. Here we read: "This term has been introduced in a general sense, since it was observed that every class has its charlatans; under this wider interpretation, charlatanry appears the vice of him who strives to recommend himself, or things belonging to him, as being endowed with imaginary qualities." There follows a comparison between the pedant and the charlatan, one frequently met with in contemporary literature. In this analogy, stress is placed upon the actor's awareness of his deeds; if the pedant exaggerates the importance of trivialities, it is because he honestly considers them vital, whereas the charlatan knows very well the slight value of all that he extols in such excessive terms. The charlatan deceives others; the pedant deceives himself. The conscience of the latter is clear.

That the charlatan realizes what he is doing is a point to be kept in mind when comparing him with the regularly accredited physicians of former times. Many of the methods and medicines employed three or four hundred years ago would, of course, seem pure quackery from our standpoint today, but not all the men who used them were quacks. The genuine doctor believed in his pills and salves and at least was careful not to make wildly fanciful claims for his skill. But the "quacksalving emperick" attracted patients precisely because he proclaimed himself superior to all ordinary medical science; those who distrusted the regular doctors and their science ran to the wonder worker who



promised cures through some magical insight or by virtue of mysterious prescriptions collected in distant lands.

If we continue our attempt to distinguish the charlatan from the genuine worker in fields other than medicine, we shall find some assistance in a curious three-volume work, published at Leipzig in 1785, a *Geschichte der menschlichen Narrheit*, or, to translate its full title, *A History of Human Folly, or Lives of Famous Adepts of the Black Arts, Gold Makers, Exorcisers of Devils, Interpreters of Omens and Palmists, Enthusiasts, Soothsayers, and Other Philosophic Fiends*. Though in this enumeration the charlatan is included with stargazers, persons gifted with second sight, mystics, and prophetic visionaries, he is carefully set apart from the other "philosophic fiends." Thus Borri, the court alchemist of Queen Christina of Sweden, is discussed in a chapter entitled "Alchemist and Charlatan," while the next chapter considers Johann Aurelius Augurelli simply as "Alchemist." Here are two men pretending to be able to fabricate gold—one is a quack, the other is not. The basic distinction is brought out in the first sentences describing Augurelli, who is called "also a goldbug, but one of a quite different and wholly innocent sort, who strove wholeheartedly to discover the philosophers' stone, but in so doing never deceived anyone." The author of this comparison was aware that the quack is known, not by his activities, but rather by his general behavior, his theatricality, and lack of genuine convictions.

This is the theme elaborated by a little essay of M. de Félice on "Charlatan, Charlatanerie" in the ninth volume of the *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire universel des connaissances humaines*, published at Yverdon in 1771. The charlatan is here defined as "one who pretends to know what he does not know, boasts abilities that he does not possess and proclaims talents that he lacks." M. de Félice then proceeds to describe some of the charlatan's methods: "He daringly discusses matters that he comprehends as little as his auditors; he does not hesitate to employ technical terms which he understands no more than his hearers; soon the ignorant admire the swindler and are convinced that he knows and can do everything that is impossible for them." Touching upon the question of the quack's power over his dupes, the author ventures a sociological estimate of the latter, judging them drawn from the "large number of persons who do not belong to



the common folk and are not wholly uneducated"—they are the half educated. But they "allow themselves to be deluded by speeches for the people," that is, lectures in a tone adapted to the illiterate.

When these writers discussed the itinerant quack in their midst, it is to be noted that they did not mention his clothes, his booth or tent, or even enumerate the salves and potions he peddled; they all dwelt on his speech, his sales talk, as the most remarkable feature of his performance. "A cousening drug-seller, a prattling quacksalver, a tatler, babler," was the early English way of characterizing the mountebank, and a glossary of 1656 in England summed up "charlatanerie" as "cousening or gulling speech." There was obviously something in the charlatan's language that struck them forcibly and reminded them of comparisons in other fields. Thus a parallel between the patter of ointment peddlers and that of abstruse German savants was observed by Johann Burckardt Mencken, ancestor of the American writer, H. L. Mencken, in his *Charlataneria Eruditorum*, published in 1716. This work was widely known and quoted in its day. Although it deals exclusively with the imposture and posing of a specific group, the savants, the frontispiece (Fig. 2) exhibits a typical medicine man of the market place, overshadowed by the folds of a huge tent; the mysterious half-light cast by these draperies lends dignity and depth to the impostor's shallow nature and performance. A woman's form can just be made out in the dim recesses. In front a clown is turning handsprings for the amusement of the audience; a factotum in exotic costume is presenting the casket which contains the magic elixir, while the quack himself, attired like a modish cavalier, with wig and sword, stands in the center of the stage and talks—and talks. So emblematical did this engraving appear to Mencken that he chose it to introduce his study, thereby emphasizing the fact that the common mountebank is the prototype of all the charlatans.

An anonymous editor produced a new edition of Mencken's work in 1791 at Leipzig, bringing the subject down to date with fresh observations of his own, under the title *Über die Charlatanerie der Gelehrten seit Mencken. Posthume Betrachtungen über Menckens Buch, aufgefrischt mit Aktualitäten* (On the Charlatanry of the Learned Since Mencken. Posthumous Observations on Mencken's Book, Refreshed with Actual Facts). This



unknown author embarked upon a polemic defense of Mencken's application of the word "charlatan," and for his own justification insisted on the exactness of the parallel between the learned gentry and the common peddler of pills:

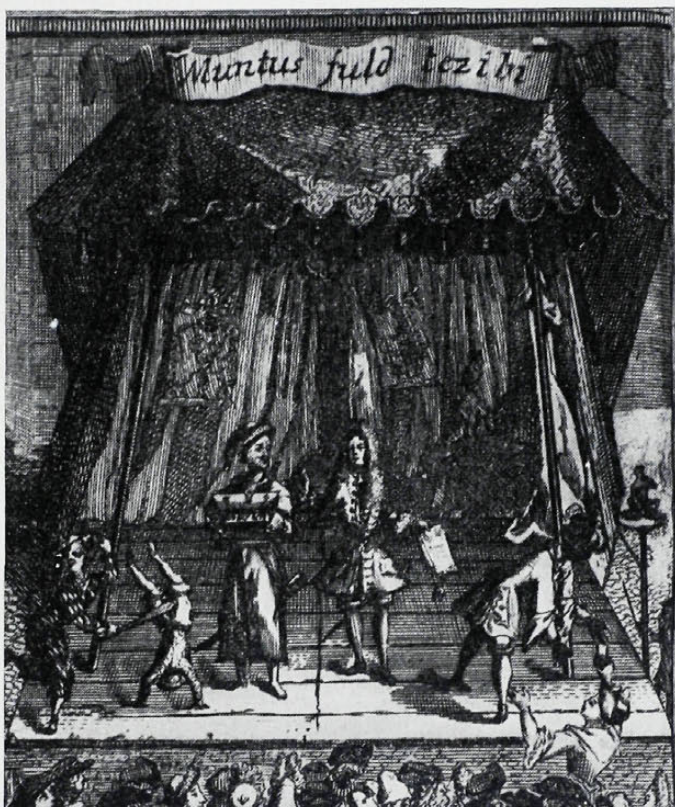
One may reproach me for having used the word charlatanry in too broad and often a wrong sense, and for confusing it with pedantry, bragging, greed, excessive pride, affectation, quarrelsomeness, premeditated deception, and so forth. I recognize this, and the following is my excuse. I have dwelt upon the notion usually connected with this word, rather than upon the word itself. One has only to look at a common charlatan on his platform of planks. That he *brags* and deceives his hearers with *premeditation* strikes everyone's eyes; but he is at the same time a *pedant*, because he lays great stress upon minutiae and trivialities, though these may indeed be the main point in his case. He is *greedy* because he acts solely from the motive of profit and employs all possible tricks, allowed or disallowed, in order to rid himself of his wares. His pride is unmistakable, for he *despises* everything around him. He is *affected* and gives himself a *peculiar air of dignity*, in order to attract the mob and move it to laughter or amazement; and only let a colleague appear near him and offer for sale just such medicaments as he has himself—instantly his professional jealousy and quarrelsomeness are awakened: My Elixir of Life is the *only true and genuine* article; my neighbor cheats you with his miserable quackery. So he will cry out and vilify the other with the lowest names, in order to disparage him. Here elixirs—there opinions—in the end it all comes to the same thing.

Besides the striking formulation in the last sentence—a quack is a quack, whether he sells elixirs or opinions—this observation adds an important feature to the picture we have already formed of the charlatan: he is intolerant. Combining this definition with that of the Frenchman, M. de Félice, we may say that the charlatan talks fluently about subjects of which he understands no more than his hearers, and that he therefore finds it advantageous to restrict his audience to those with a minimum of knowledge; he must be intolerant toward all who can spoil his business by bringing new insight and knowledge to the masses. Always and in every age, the angry intolerance of the quack is directed against true science, the power most hostile to his influence; but



his antagonists need not be scientists, they may come from any walk of life and group, like the quack himself. Both the knave and his foes are products, not of any one class or profession, but of certain universal human qualities.

The terse sentences of the dictionaries bring out much that is



2. *The mysterious tent of the mountebank.*

*Engraved frontispiece from Charlataneria Eruditorum, by Johann Burckardt Mencken. Amsterdam, 1716.*

revelatory about the character and methods of the early charlatans, and much that is applicable to their successors. But although they hint at it, they cast little light on the problem of the charlatan's relation to his dupes beyond calling him a swindler who speculates consciously upon the credulity of others, a verbose and irritable mountebank fond of surrounding himself with mysterious mummary. But how can such a man hope to draw thousands upon thousands of followers to his feet?

Some answer may be found in contemplating the shadows of the mountebank's tent in Mencken's frontispiece: the artist suggests that secrecy is a prime ingredient in the strange spell. A master counterfeiter of wares, words, and opinions, the charlatan wears the cloak of obscurity that has always enveloped the art of forging and counterfeiting. Only a small minority of the genuinely immune have offered active resistance to this masquerading. The great mass of mankind has always been predisposed to marvel at mysteries, and this was especially true at certain historic periods when the secure foundations of life seemed shaken and old values, economic or spiritual, long accepted as certainties, could no longer be relied upon. Then the numbers of the charlatan's dupes multiplied—the "self-killers," as a seventeenth-century Englishman called them.

The extraordinary power of impostors is therefore only to be understood after a consideration of the minds and circumstances of their gullible victims, the crowds who sought them out, half convinced before a word was spoken. The explanation of charlatanism is to be sought not merely in the quack's skill as counterfeiter and popularizer, but also in the character of his audience, the historic situation, and his strange, dual connection with the development of modern science—his enemy, yet his constant assistant.



## The Dupes of the Charlatan

ALTHOUGH the aroma of mystery has always been associated with the person and operations of the charlatan, not all historic periods were equally favorable to the exploitation of the occult and esoteric. His easiest triumphs were won at times when scientific research had outrun theory, leaving on all sides, as it pushed ahead, a fringe of the inexplicable, baffling even to experts and still more to the general public. Such an epoch was the eighteenth century, when the new technology was developing, producing marvels that were as yet imperfectly understood. The supreme chance of the charlatan to profit by ignorance and bewilderment was, however, offered in the Renaissance, the age that provided him with an appropriate name.

In the Renaissance, all science was mysterious: chemistry was just emerging from alchemy, astrology was on the verge of becoming astronomy. The lore of the occult could hardly be distinguished from the "knowledge" of the soberest students. The Christian mysticism of the Middle Ages had not faded from the horizon, although medieval religious dogmas were dissolving; pagan deities mingled oddly with the saints—Lear swore by Apollo. Mankind was by no means ready to abandon its beliefs, even its superstitions, yet it was leaning more and more to rationalism. The quick fancy and flushed imagination of an earlier time were combined with an awakening critical intelligence that belonged to the modern age. The Renaissance, therefore, stood between faith and knowledge, between a dying religiosity and an unborn science. The minds of the European peoples were beset by fresh doubts, although new energies were roused; they were torn between a Pizarro's thirst for action and a Hamlet's fear of the deed. Here, then, in a time of shaken mental security but of mounting hopes, was an ideal atmosphere for the swindler.

Mankind was indeed turning from otherworldly devotion to a keen interest in this earth and its realities, but so long as the natural sciences were so undeveloped, it was impossible to find satisfying explanations of the many phenomena that were being observed. The thought of the age was not of the systematic sort



that, a few generations later, was to bring order into the realm of perceived facts, grouping them and establishing laws of causation. As yet, men were still enchanted with the facts themselves, viewing the world as an exciting, if bewildering, blend of forces, vitality, adventure. Unable to classify or interpret more than a fraction of what they saw, and hampered by older concepts they had not entirely sloughed off, they could not fix upon a goal. Activity remained without direction: the universe was problematic. Still fascinated by the exploration of Nature's wonders, delighting in the *varietas rerum*, the abundance and diversity of things, the children of the Renaissance could not separate the sensory from the spiritual; in their view of the world, the real and the imaginary intermingled in a marvelous confusion that could produce either a Shakespearean *Midsummer Night's Dream* or—charlatanry.

Never afterwards was the mysterious so close to art as in that age of bewildered searching. Medieval art had been an interpreter, bringing the Word of God to the people, making the story of religion intelligible to all through the simple and sensuous picture. But now, in the Renaissance, appeared the Mona Lisa, with her secretive smile, whose very inscrutability was felt to be her most precious quality. In this atmosphere of marvel and mystery, falsification could flourish; never again was it to be so unconscious, so genuinely imaginative, as in that epoch.

In an age devoted to exploration a new value was placed upon travel. The contemporaries of the great adventurers and conquistadores were driven by a restless urge to partake of new experiences not only in distant parts but in neighboring countries. And because the charlatan's profession required constant wandering, he lived up to the ideal pattern of the times; by the very conditions of his existence he became a traveler, a cosmopolitan, and an adventurer. This was in part the clue to the attraction of the later charlatans, the famous impostors of the eighteenth century, with their incessant roaming, their Faustian impulse to forsake the study for observation of life—to take an Easter promenade through the blossoming world. Behind a Cagliostro and a Saint-Germain loomed the great and earnest shadows of the Renaissance.

In the Renaissance, therefore, the quack appeared more genuine than at any other period; he was the natural product of



the mental climate of that time. But he was still a quack. It would be wrong to confer on him the title of "adventurer," the term so often bestowed on the young nobleman in the Middle Ages, which still retained its honorable meaning in the Renaissance. The separate portions of many medieval romances were called *aventure*, but none of that selfless romantic quality, that Don Quixotery, lingered about the adventures of the quack. He traveled to deceive and became rapidly more expert in his deceptions as



3. *A traveling quacksalver.*

*German woodcut from about the middle of the sixteenth century.*

knowledge of human nature was deepened by the thinkers of the Renaissance. That age had made a cult of the individual; philosophy, poetry, and painting joined to rediscover and celebrate individuality. And those speculators upon human weaknesses, the charlatans, were not behind the great portrait painters in searching out the traits of the human personality; they not only observed men but were constantly refining upon the art of influencing them. It was during this time of flux and confusion in the realm of ideas that the charlatans learned to avoid the man who could think; they turned their attention wholly to the credulous portions of humanity, a principle to which their successors have remained true.

And they learned something else as they handed out their daily rounds of elixirs and tinctures in the market place and watched the sudden flickering of hope in the eyes of the masses



—hope that old age might be transmuted to youth through the Elixir of Life and that poverty might be changed to riches by the tincture of gold. The quacks saw that transmutation is the password to the hearts of men. Human hopes and desires are easily kindled by the thought of radical change, a stroke of luck that can suddenly unfetter a man's life; the fervent but unscientific character of this longing fostered the unscientific idea of transmutation. Nor was it dangerous to arouse such hopes because the masses regarded transmutation as a gamble, as a pure gift of fortune, like the highest prize in the lottery, not as something to be earned and counted on; hence, if the promise was not fulfilled, they were not enraged.

Those who exploit this yearning for transmutation which springs from the depths of human misery—the men who juggle with the faith of trusting crowds—are one of the monstrous plagues that afflict mankind. It is no accident that the painter Hieronymus Bosch, who knew so well how to limn the most uncanny and loathsome visions of hell, should have included in his representations the master juggler, the charlatan who leads the simpleminded to perdition. As this picture shows (Fig. 4), the fine intuition of Bosch recognized the character of the charlatan's relation to his audience, and the types receptive or immune to his influence. In the group those predestined to succumb to the spell are staring straight at the master juggler: the little bareheaded man is almost captured, though he still retains a half-ironical smile, while the pale face lifted in ecstasy above him reveals complete surrender to the hypnotic atmosphere. Wrapped in a white wimple is the head of a woman, whose expression half suggests aversion, half temptation; she watches intently, and so does the large man in the foreground, bending over to take in the magic even more greedily. Behind this figure, symbolizing the final capitulation of the dupe, stands a pick-pocket, in the act of seizing his purse; the thief is an accomplice of the juggler, who is accustomed to refuse money with an air of lofty indifference, but receives it nevertheless through his light-fingered assistant. In the gathering, there is at least one representative of the thinking minority, the immune; he is not looking at the charlatan at all, but watches the believers instead, with an inscrutable smile. And the charlatan himself? The power of suggestion in his glance is strengthened by magical appurtenances,



and by his clothing and tall hat—he looks different from the rest.

This picture might be an illustration for the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, who declared it sinful to buy and swallow the medicines of quacks, but reckoned it an even greater sin to open one's eyes and ears to the exhibitions and lectures of the mounte-



4. *The charlatan. The audience, watching the charlatan's tricks, exhibits varying reactions, as Bosch subtly suggests. Not all the spectators have been caught by the magic circle seen in the foreground.*

*By Hieronymus Bosch. End of the fifteenth century.*

banks in the market place. Both the saint and the painter agree that persons who are really immune to temptation would not take sufficient interest in the quack even to listen to him—and that those who do exhibit such interest are already on the borderland of credulity, and half guilty. Those prevented by caution or critical insight from watching the charlatan would be likely, however, to study the abused victims of the fraud; their interest would lie, not in the knave, but in the dupes, whom they would



regard with shocked surprise. Moreover, the immune are those who demand the fulfillment of promises made to them. The gullible are satisfied with the illusion of the moment and do not look beyond it; they prefer hope to what they have and are content with a well-painted image of their desires. The charlatan achieves his great power by simply opening a possibility for men to believe what they already want to believe. The immune have no passion, except for dispassionate analysis, and they also have humor, which implies detachment—their gaze is filled with irony. But the credulous cannot keep at a distance; they crowd around the wonder worker, entering his personal aura, surrendering themselves to illusion with a heavy solemnity, like cattle.

It was to the charlatan's advantage that the individuals predisposed to credulity should multiply, that the groups of his adherents should enlarge to mass proportions, guaranteeing an ever greater scope for his triumphs. And this was in fact to occur, as science was popularized, from the Renaissance on down through succeeding centuries. With the immense growth of knowledge and its spread through printing in modern times, the mass of the half educated, the eagerly gullible prey of the quack, also increased, became indeed a majority; real power could be based on their wishes, opinions, preferences, and rejections. The charlatan's empire accordingly widened with the modern dissemination of knowledge; since he operated on the basis of science, however much he perverted it, producing gold with a technique borrowed from chemistry and his wonderful balsams with the apparatus of medicine, he could not appeal to an entirely ignorant folk. The illiterate would be protected against his absurdities by their healthy common sense. His choicest audience would be composed of the semiliterate, those who had exchanged their common sense for a little distorted information and had encountered science and education at some time, though briefly and unsuccessfully. In all likelihood, their experience with education had been unhappy; because they had asked fool's questions, they had not received satisfying answers and had come away full of resentment, yet hankering for more knowledge. The wounds inflicted on their vanity could be cured only by the soothing balm of the irrational. This was the audience, easily intoxicated by visions, that sought the charlatan quite as eagerly as he looked for it: the half educated wanted no really learned leader,



nor would they listen to one wholly ignorant: their needs were ideally met by the counterfeiter of knowledge, who served up a rehash of science in a form that suited their appetite. The charlatan must be one of themselves, flesh of their flesh, though differentiated by a superior ability; like them, he must be full of uncomprehending hatred for that education which has no ulterior motive. A half-educated man need not be a charlatan, but most charlatans have been half-educated men.

Although the quack wins his successes under the cloak of learning, he has helped to shake the foundations of knowledge and science by refusing due recognition of his borrowings. Announcing his great superiority over all ordinary savants, with what an eighteenth-century writer called a "tone of triumphant raillery at reason and knowledge," he has been at the same time anxious to procure testimonials from professors and doctors. Every flimsy leaflet in praise of a corn cure attests this curious contradiction.

If we seek a vivid picture of the relations between the charlatan and his followers, we must go beyond the dictionaries and the naïve reports of eyewitnesses and turn to the critical pencil of an artist like Giuseppe Maria Mitelli. One might call this publicist genius the pictorial city chronicler of Bologna; whatever transpired in the town he swiftly recorded in sketches that were offered for sale by peddlers in the streets and at fairs. The drawing entitled "Il Gigante" (Fig. 5) belonging to the year 1690, reveals traits of the charlatan's public that are timeless. Mounted upon a platform stands a huge hero in armor, with shining blond curls, making broad gestures in the style of a provincial "ham" actor. Clearly he belongs to that species of quacks described by Chereau in the *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales* (Paris, 1874) who liked to appear as medieval knights in armor, then the favorite characters of opera. Brandishing his sword with one hand, and planting his other fist on his hip, both gestures that have long symbolized strength, he expresses that radiant supernatural energy in which people are so happy to bask. The superscription reads: "True worldly wisdom consists in relating good of him who is mighty, fearing him who is strong, esteeming him who is richer, and praising the victor." In the audience is an ugly man exclaiming, "Che bella persona" and imagining himself in the handsome image of the giant. Others



are crying, "How splendid he appears!" "How strong he is!" The little fat fellow marvels: "How tall he is!" "Whatever he does, is always right!" murmurs the cripple admiringly. "He is an Atlas!" "Nobody is like him!" "He is always victorious over everyone!" "What a genius!" These comments betray the lustful pleasure of the populace in crooking their backs before the hero, their joy at being allowed to marvel at the superman, and their relief at transferring the burden of action or thought to the shoulders of another, staring at him in amazement while shunning any responsibility themselves. In the foreground one figure has taken off his hat, abasing himself to the earth with voluptuous humility: "I bow and respect him greatly." But the little man still nearer, who is bending so deeply that he touches the boot of the "strong man" with his nose, speaks the most revealing words of all: "I have smelt him and now I feel so well!" Far in the rear, indeed, may be seen one solitary individual—perhaps a self-portrait of Mitelli?—who looks the hero steadily in the eye and says nothing. He is the skeptic, a mute observer isolated amid the fumes of this incense. The steady gaze of the only critic does not perturb the "Gigante" however; that hero is experiencing his great moment, satisfying his urge for self-assertion as he struts self-consciously in his gleaming armor before all these bent backs.

To one definite type of charlatan, the satisfaction of this desire for self-assertion is more important even than material advantage. Like cocks, such impostors love to parade before marveling patients and sufferers. And it was as a cock that the quacksalver was typified, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, in a woodcut from the hand of Hans Weiditz, the masterful illustrator of Petrarch (Fig. 6). On a box of ointments, decorated with heraldic symbols, the mysteriously sealed prop of his power, stands the cock charlatan, looking down importantly through his spectacles at a kneeling frog. The frog, abject in credulous surrender and expiring humility, is carrying out a magic rite by handing him a urinal. Since the gullible must at all costs preserve their illusion that the man who heals them knows everything, the frog is free from all shadow of doubt or criticism, and expects every miracle from the cock—an animal like itself. In a hatlike crown on the head of the old frog nests a stork, about to snatch off a dunce cap from the head of the





5. The giant. Before the heroic-sized mountebank stand his dupes; each is revealed by his admiring exclamation as a type of the folly and weakness on which the strong man plays.

By Giuseppe Maria Mitelli. Bologna, 1690.



baby frog. Around the table where the cock stands, gathers an assortment of fabulous creatures, sufferers in search of a healer. There is the sow, hind legs in comfortable house slippers, fore parts supported by crutches, and about her neck a little bag on a string, perhaps containing some amulet or drug. She and her kind are lucrative patients of the charlatan. The big stork be-



6. *The cock as quacksalver.*

*Woodcut for a broadsheet by Hans Weiditz. First half of the sixteenth century.*

hind her has ear muffs on his saucy little hat—or did the artist intend them as blinkers? On the quack's table lie dice, grand symbol of his profession, indicating that his uncertain promises of cures and happiness exercise the same hectic fascination that attends the gambler's throw. Luck is beyond calculation and certainty; though it may produce a miracle, it excludes the idea of security. Because it is irrational, luck attracts worshipers at moments when the rational proves disappointing, when hope of security is fading. In such an hour, the masses may look to the irrational to provide the protection and success that have failed them elsewhere.



As we have seen in the painting of Hieronymus Bosch, the charlatan endeavored to make himself imposing through his clothes, hat, and magic properties, which indicated that he was apart from the ordinary run of mankind; the people were to realize immediately that he did not belong to them and become curious about his origin. Many of the lesser impostors, especially the stargazers, and some of the great cosmopolitan swindlers like Cagliostro and Magno-Cavallo as well, liked to appear in the robes of Hindus, Turks, Egyptians, Tartars, or other Oriental magicians. In the United States, the feathers of the American Indian served a similar purpose for the itinerant "medicine man" with his "herbal remedies." The curiosity of mankind has always been aroused by the stranger from an unknown shore or tribe and an air of mystery; a prohibition like Lohengrin's to Elsa, "Nie sollst Du mich befragen" (Never shalt thou question me!), only serves to whet the popular appetite.

Such exoticism had a more serious function than that of theatrical entertainment; it enabled the magician to avoid the necessity of justifying his practice by proving superior knowledge. He could proclaim a mission, a "calling" from on high, declaring that he had acquired his lore through occult studies (of course, a supreme form of wisdom) in lands on which his public's eyes had never rested. In the garb of a learned man, an Oriental seer, the ignoramus was transfigured into a better and wiser being from another world—and his masquerade permitted the charlatan to escape critical questioning. The aura of Eastern wonder, in which every ointment peddler of the market place was as eager to wrap himself as any of his greater colleagues, like Saint-Germain, served not merely for momentary attraction but also to eliminate dangerous discussion. How can one attack, or even pretend to discuss, matters of which one knows nothing—and to which only the adversary has the key? As the opponents of the charlatan were exactly those persons who hesitated to speak on subjects with which they had no acquaintance, it was easy for him to silence them by pointing to his own knowledge of foreign countries and to the secrets of ancient wisdom which he, the generous bestower of happiness, alone possessed. Thus debates that might have grown too warm for the medicine man were unlikely to arise. The basis of the charlatan's knowledge and actions was put outside the sphere of any matter-of-fact discus-



sion; like floating threads of gossamer, his arguments slipped from the grasp of critics. And since it proved so advantageous to enshroud themselves in magic, to the accompaniment of exciting music, these confusers of the mind were not only able to turn aside theoretical discussion; they could laugh to scorn all science based on theory while the crowd applauded.

True medical science could understand the composition of a drug, but beyond the contents it could not go. What did the doctors know of the great art of applying medicine, a branch of far higher importance, as far as the masses were concerned? That art was exactly what the charlatan understood. His thorough mastery of the subject is revealed by the mysterious gesture of the quack in the engraving of G. B. Pollanzani (Fig. 7), after a picture of the Sienese artist, Bernardino Mei, of the year 1636. Here the object presented to the crowd is a little flask of medicine, sealed with parchment. But the quack does not hold it, as anyone else would naturally do, between his fingers. He balances it upon the back of his closed fist, while, with the thumb of the other hand, raised in gesticulation, he points backwards, to the high heavens and the remote distance, as though conjuring unseen spirits. The costume points to these far distances as well, being a white Eastern robe, half exotic and half houserobe, girt with a fringed Turkish scarf; but it reveals, where it opens, ordinary white trunk hose. His heavy walking shoes tell of the difficulties of his trade, and have nothing to do with all this Oriental magic. A mysterious but suggestive scar is visible on his forehead. He is no longer young; his beard is wild and his graying hair has grown to his shoulders. Unwashed, sweating, and weary, his thick-set appearance suggests a down-at-the-heels monk of some Near Eastern order. But how compellingly he forces the multitude to look up to him! How cleverly he has erected his platform so they must crane their necks to see him and the mysterious phials he has arranged at his feet like an army about to march! Horrified amazement, a shudder of fear, runs through the audience. Only observe the young man standing before the slim Tuscan tower and note how his empty simpleton's face reflects the speech from on high. His mouth and eyes drink in the terror greedily, and with one hand he involuntarily follows the gesture and rhythm of the speaker. Sweat has broken out on his brow, a not too disagreeable dew of anxiety that he



is mopping away with a large cloth. On the left, however, stands the truly predestined dupe of the quack, his features inscribed



7. *The charlatan. The old quack balances a vial of his balsam on his closed fist: his public stares with curiosity and dread.*

*Engraved by Giovanni Battista Pollanzani, in 1735, after a painting by Bernardino Mei of Siena, 1636.*

with self-pity, one hand pressed to his brow, the other lifting restorative smelling salts. For the benefit of all those present, the old magician is balancing his little bottle of medicine, working with the twin mediums of mysticism and dexterity, the



former borrowed from foreign lands and the latter from his colleague of the market place, the juggler.

One of the earliest forms of popular entertainment was the show of the prestidigitator and "lightning-change artist." Among the ancients, the actor who seemed to transform himself by slipping into the clothes and masks of other people was reckoned near the gods, for only gods in Greek mythology possessed the real power to assume new personalities. Such actors on the stage, however, frankly played a part and after their performances returned to their own egos, thus letting the public judge how well they had succeeded in their impersonations. It is true that even these jugglers and magicians managed to confuse the critical judgment of their audiences to a risky degree when they caused an empty basket to blossom with roses, changed a modest pocket handkerchief into a gala display of flags, or made heavy objects bound across the room in defiance of gravity. But though feats like these work upon the imagination of the public, the presumption always remains that the magician's secret is his dexterity, a measurable rather than a mystic ability. Much as he may dazzle his audience by his tricks, these are still looked upon as a trivial and harmless amusement; he does not, like the charlatan, tamper with the fates of individuals in his audience, or encourage them to defy the laws of existence.

Every charlatan had to be a master of the magician's art. But "charlatan" and "juggler" were not interchangeable words, although they were used interchangeably even toward the end of the eighteenth century. A critical report of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, for example, on the juggler Philadelphia, who was well known at that time in Germany, fell into this error by saying: "Whenever a clear unprejudiced head found an opportunity to observe such a charlatan closely. . . ." But Philadelphia was not a real charlatan; the true quack was careful not to attempt such tricks with his own hands, even though he hired jugglers and prestidigitators, ropewalkers and fire swallowers, to perform about his tent. It would have been too tempting for his audience to connect his medical and other feats with simple legerdemain, had they discovered him to be suspiciously nimble. Nevertheless, sleight of hand was essential in his trade. How could the "gold maker" smuggle the grain of precious metal into the boiling bath of baser ingredients, save by a dexterous trick?



How else could he conjure up the spirits of the dead and cause them to breathe on the necks of his alarmed public, as was so often done? If the prestidigitator is an artist in making changes, the charlatan is an artist in promising changes—transformations in health and material circumstances.

In the case of the impostor, manual skill involved such a measure of risk—it might be death for him to be discovered—that he tended to become its slave; he executed his feats in a spirit of almost sporting bravura. So important was this tool and weapon that the charlatan was in as much danger as his public of overestimating its importance. When he had attained such mechanical perfection that the human finger functioned as precisely and perfectly as an elaborate machine, he might feel able to dispense with intellect. And in doing tricks the charlatan found an intoxicating success that compensated him for all the injuries he had experienced in his career, for his ignominious failures to conquer in realms of the mind, for the wounds he had suffered in running up against the hard dimensions of reality. In intellect, in reason, he was inferior and a failure, but success led along the path of dexterity; he might even rise so high that he could afford the supreme pleasure of despising the intellect. This shift in values is illustrated by an unknown and unimportant magician, Giacomo Stagni, one of those wanderers who traveled from fair to fair at the close of the eighteenth century. On his visiting card, representing him in action (Fig. 8), he had the words printed: “Sono più destro di man, che di cervello,” which might be freely translated, “My hand is cleverer than my brain.” This advertisement was intended to attract the crowd, and did so as nothing else could. Here was a man boasting that he could shine in another field than that of thought. Giacomo Stagni ventures to hint—and there is a touch of mockery in the line—that he cares nothing for the performances of the mind; that he can flourish in spite of it.

To such men as Stagni, the study of magic and the juggler’s arts brought compensation for personal failure and material difficulties. It offered them a welcome opportunity for self-assertion. In this, the charlatan resembled his dupes; his, too, was a weak and disappointed nature that sought consolation in the realm of illusion on a plane that was no longer that of the sober earth. The rare individual, anchored to reality by work,

able to watch men and events with objectivity, may dispense with such pretense; but the rest, crushed instead of matured by disaster, turn to dreams. They demand luck from some other planet when it has failed them on this earth; if the world denies them



8. Visiting card of Giacomo Stagni, an Italian magician and charlatan. His motto reads: "*Sono più destro di man, che di cervello*" (My hand is cleverer than my brain).

*End of the eighteenth century.*

success, they seek it in the world of phantoms; and if bitter circumstances hedge in their lives, they cry for the magician to come and wave away the laws of existence with his conjuring wand. The quack himself is a frustrated and resentful character like those who compose his train. He is followed by the similarly half enlightened; the vacillating and sorrow burdened are his natural prey.



## II

### ALCHEMY AND ITS CHARLATANS





## Alchemy, the Scientific Handmaid of the Charlatan

As the term "charlatanry" has been widened in popular usage, its meaning has become vaguer. We now employ it in an increasingly figurative sense, to cover many sorts of pretension as well as knavery in spheres far removed from the market place and sawdust ring; in so doing, we have lost sight of the living originals who first gave the word its power of suggestion. To restore color and outline to the word, we must return to concrete examples and cast a backward glance across the centuries to the common mountebank, "any kind of fellow on two planks, and three hogsheads (as empty as his own)," strutting at rural fairs, and to his more splendid colleagues, the quacks of quality, who traveled over Europe in swift coaches, attended by heralds with trumpets, lute girls and troupes of zanies. Only by reaching back into the past to refresh the memory of the earlier professional swindlers can we understand how such a generalized concept as "charlatanry" arose, and why the "charlatan" so called first appeared on the threshold of modern times.

Jugglers, conjurors, and purveyors of false remedies had existed in previous ages and among most peoples; they appear in the ancient literatures of the Greeks, Hindus, and Chinese. The *ciarlatano* of the Renaissance was distinguished from his predecessors by a new method of appeal and a special jargon. These he owed to alchemy, which, like other "secret" sciences, had burst into a new bloom at that period; it was studied and taught and was on the verge of admission to the regular academic faculties. To this body of abstruse teachings, the true scientist, the contemporary and counterpart of the charlatan, was indebted for useful suggestions; but the impostor had seized upon it as quickly, adapting it to his peculiar needs. Alchemy became the handmaid of charlatanry and was to remain so for three hundred years; until late in the eighteenth century the terminology of the quack and much of his mummery as well revealed his heavy borrowings from the alchemist's language and practices.

Through the propositions of the quack, moreover, ran the same leitmotiv that pervaded alchemy: that was *transmutation*.

Mere conversion of baser metals into gold did not satisfy the "adepts" in alchemistic arcana. Not only did they propose to transmute poverty into wealth, but they also intended, through lengthening the life span and regenerating the worn-out tissues of the body, to transmute age into youth. As a third if incidental goal, they aspired to heal the sick; this, too, may have been regarded as a transmutation—from disease to health. All three desires for radical change were directed toward the improvement of man's earthly lot, an ideal that was "modern" and ran counter to the Christian precepts of the Middle Ages. St. Augustine, with his "cantare et currere," had held it to be the duty of the Christian to hasten through this life, singing and sightless, with mind and heart fixed solely on the speedy attainment of other-worldly bliss. The alchemist's wish to better temporal conditions betrayed a heretical clinging to the immediate and actual, the "here and now," which was opposed to the teachings of the early mystics. Indeed, the great attraction of alchemy for the medieval man may well have indicated a reaction against the world-denying asceticism of the devout. As the hold of the church became relaxed in the Renaissance and Reformation and afterward, it was easy for the charlatan to exploit this trend; promising a happiness to be achieved at once, in the "here and now," he helped to secularize popular dreams. That this is the nature of his appeal was brought out by a definition of the "sources of charlatanism" in the volume on medicine of an *Encyclopédie méthodique*, published at Paris and Liège in 1787: "If we take these two truths to be self-evident, namely, that man esteems life and health more highly than all other goods (it might be added, riches), that, further, his imagination exercises an absolute power over him, strengthened by habit, then, I ask, why should it not be an easy matter to persuade him that some specific, a dish or a certain régime, would be extremely wholesome for him, even when that is not at all the case?" The charlatan encourages men to expect a swift alteration in their lot, to be effected through a simple talisman, a new draught or diet, a technical discovery or a plan of living.

The idea that such radical changes lay within the power of mankind may be traced back to Greek theory; the Aristotelian



teaching of the mutability of elements was one of the factors that kept alive this hope throughout the Middle Ages. The Greek notion was based on a purely visual impression: metals appeared bright against the dark ores in the process of smelting. The extraction of metals from the raw ores appeared a change in matter, and color was thought to play a vital part in the alteration. If colors had the power to convert substances, and if the elements were mutable, why should it not be possible to transform base metals through coloration into gold? The expressions "tincture" and "tincturing," so often met with in alchemistic writings, point to this early supposition.

Following the expeditions of Alexander the Great, the Greek conception of the universe was disturbed and confused by coming into touch with Oriental ideas. The study of Eastern star religions led men to expect success or failure in the extraction of precious metals from the favorable conjuncture of the constellations. Chaldean astrology, thus linked to the theory of transmutation through this mingling of peoples and doctrines, was eventually to give the alchemist the incidental function of casting horoscopes; and hence the charlatans as well were to make a rushing business of "nativities." These fantastic concepts were adopted by the Romans, who handed them down to medieval and more modern times, but the Romans themselves did not, in fact, regard alchemy very highly. They viewed the weird claims of the counterfeiter with skepticism and a Latin shrug of the shoulders. It was in Egypt, which had retained a very different emotional and mental atmosphere, despite all the experiments of empiric technique, that alchemy became a magic art. Undergoing a remarkable marriage with Oriental demonology, it was presently regarded as "holy," though tinged with a suspicion of sorcery, for the gold makers were the successors of the old Egyptian priests.

To the functions of making gold and casting horoscopes was soon joined another—which paid well, too—the healing of disease. This purpose was proclaimed in the writings of the pseudo-Democritus and of Hermes Trismegistus (the Thrice Greatest) in the first century after Christ; according to these works, the alchemist must seek a magic elixir which would enable him not only to alter the nature of metals but also to transmute disease into health. The mysterious nomenclature of this dark science was



to a large extent derived from the Greeks, who had been the writers on the subject throughout antiquity. Al-chemy is nothing but the word chemistry with the prefix "al," added by the Arabs when they conquered the antique world and entered upon its cultural heritage. The magic powder Xerion became al-iksir, the later elixir, the universal specific. Whether the potent substance sought by the alchemist was a powder, a potion, or a touchstone, whether it was called the "philosophers' stone," "potable gold" or "red tincture" did not matter, for in any case it was supposed to unite three properties: it made gold, lengthened life, and cured all ills. This must be kept in mind, for it eventually led to the sweeping denial of the efficacy of specialized learning on the part of charlatans, and to a denunciation of specialists. The chemist who could make gold did not need a doctor, for he automatically and without medical knowledge became a doctor himself.

Alchemy was brought to northern Europe through contact with the Arabs in Palestine, Sicily, southern Italy, and Spain, and also by way of Greece. Monasteries fostered this occult science, for during the Middle Ages alchemy did not always have the questionable character imputed to it in later times; many a chemical discovery came out of the secluded hearths or "kitchens" of the gold makers, which at certain periods were the only free research laboratories. As science developed in the Renaissance, it was still mingled with the mythical and occult; this curious amalgamation was typified by Paracelsus, the first philosopher to place chemistry at the service of medicine. His *tinctura physicorum* was an example of a universal specific, capable at once of healing and of altering metals. In his book, *Panagramm*, he declares: "Unlike those who say alchemy makes gold, makes silver, this [I say] is more noble, [let us] make arcana and direct the same against diseases."

But about the time this type of teaching emerged from monastic retreats and offered to place the results of its serious researches at the service of true science, it also unwittingly delivered an ideal tool into the impostor's hand. Together, therefore, at the same epoch, the alchemist and the charlatan entered upon a phase of vigorous activity. But precisely because they were so closely associated, one must inquire what differentiated



the one from the other. Did not both fabricate gold? Did not both indulge in mystification? Why, then, two terms for one and the same thing?

Like the alchemist, the charlatan appealed to an age in which awareness of the surrounding world was growing steadily sharper. As the cult of beauty and individualism spread, and the capacity to extract rich and various enjoyment from life became more general, the men and women of the Renaissance experienced a deepening attachment to the earthly pleasures of the "here and now." Gold was the key to all this delight, and the elixir lengthened the period of its possession. Now gold and the Elixir of Life were what the charlatan had to offer. He had been taught by the alchemist to couple gold with life in his business. But there remained a wide gulf between the aims and efforts of the two. The lives of the alchemists were as a rule hard and full of privation; they believed in the precepts of their lore and were eager to increase their "knowledge." But the charlatan had worked out nothing for himself; he merely took over the externals of a science that seemed to promise profit, and exploited researches with which he was not connected either by conviction or sacrifice. And since he was animated only by the thought of making money, he falsified and distorted the knowledge of others when he bent it to his own use. The true "adept" of the occult arts commonly lived in poverty and seldom drew advantage from his labors; he acted in good faith, the charlatan did not. This is very clearly expressed in a modern definition of the charlatan given by A. Chereau in Dechambre's *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales*, published in 1874; according to his view, quacks are those who "promise what they cannot give; affect a value, a form, a power that they do not possess, and make others believe in what they themselves do not believe; finally all those who, as distillers of lies, speculate upon the credulity and stupidity of mankind." Here a finger is laid on the concrete acts which give rise to the general concept of charlatanry: the quack is the counterfeiter of knowledge, and his exploitation of the alchemist's work is typical of his methods. In adapting the borrowed raw material of others for his own pecuniary profit, "distilling" lies, to use the appropriate alchemistic image chosen by Chereau, he shows himself the skilful popularizer. And his boastfulness



in extolling mysteries and remedies serves to set him yet further apart from the quiet "adept" in his den, toiling among his mortars and crucibles.

There were some men, however, even in the Middle Ages and still more in the Renaissance, who rejected the genuine alchemist as determinedly as his imitator, the pseudo alchemistic charlatan. With clear insight they realized what dubious purposes this kind of research might serve, and what manner of exploiters might live on its spurious achievements. Although alchemy might have its advocates in the Middle Ages, because it furthered scientific exploration, it was unhesitatingly denounced by Dante; he condemned alchemists to the eighth circle of his *Inferno*, placing them among the counterfeiters. In his journey through hell, Dante encounters the spirits of those who had forged words as well as metals and coins. He meets Capocchio, an alchemist, brought to the stake in Siena at the close of the thirteenth century. This shade declares that he is suffering the cruel torments of the Hereafter because he had sought to counterfeit metals through his occult arts. "And if you really knew me on earth, as you say," he tells Dante, "then you will also remember that I was by nature a superior ape." By this comparison, Dante intends to characterize those men who are born comedians, like the ape masters of mimicry, whether of figure or gesture, for such persons are capable of every form of imitation, including counterfeiting. The same image was used centuries later by David Teniers; when that artist typified alchemy in his "*Plaisir des Fous*" (Fig. 9), he gave it the semblance of a feather-decked ape squatting before a hearth provided with all the alchemistic appurtenances—his eyes fixed with a glassy stare upon the fires.

The rejection of alchemy might come from the true Christian, like Dante, with his firm and positive attitude, his temperate weighing of the joys of the hereafter and the present. Or it might, as in the case of a Leonardo da Vinci, arise from an objective mind which would not suffer impairment of its integrity. "A lying and depraved art," Da Vinci called it. In the Renaissance, when he wrote, alchemy had become entangled with pantheistic beliefs and the pagan mythologizing of Nature, and so made itself as acceptable to the new generations as it had been to medieval men; nevertheless, a few skeptical minds were able



to preserve their clear and penetrating vision, a fact well illustrated by the interesting memoirs of a doctor of Milan, Girolamo Cardano (1501–76), of which Goethe thought so highly. To



9. *Le plaisir des Fous.* Alchemy is satirized in the figure of the ape with the bellows.

*By David Teniers the Elder. Engraver unknown.*

Cardano, the man with the “cold heart and warm head,” as he characterized himself, the “intellectus,” the power to sift and order experience, held the highest value in life. Such an individual would not lose his balance even though brought up on the



occult sciences; he could investigate obscure corners without risk to his mental health. Mysterious signs and voices did indeed play a great role in the life of this unhappy man, but he merely took cognizance of them, soberly and modestly, without any bombastic interpretation. He only remarked that there were some natural phenomena which remained inexplicable. Thus, the odor of burning wax candles once gave him a premonition of a neighbor's approaching death. Again, when his beloved son became involved in a poison murder case and was placed on trial, there appeared on the father's hand a curious red mark in the shape of a sword, which continued to grow clearer and redder. On the day set for the son's execution, blood exuded from this sword-shaped mark; the mark faded as life ebbed from the son.

Cardano writes all this down, but he never made a business out of his sensitiveness to such psychic signs and portents. Nor was he misled by the instruction given him as a child: "In my early youth, about the ninth year, my father gave me a first grounding in arithmetic, as though it were an occult science. Where he himself drew his knowledge, I do not know. Soon after he taught me Arabian astrology also and attempted to instill in me an artificial system of mnemonics." Reared in such a mental atmosphere, and later teaching in it, Girolamo Cardano could nevertheless set down sentences which preserve a fine objectivity and steady discernment: "Therefore I have never engaged in bad, harmful, and senseless sciences, and have never occupied myself with either chiromancy, or the knowledge of poison mixing or alchemy—and also I had nothing to do with that magic which casts spells or raises evil spirits and the souls of the dead." Even in the age of occultism, a thinking man, made immune by the structure of his mind and character to dazzling appearances, was able to retain his keenness of judgment; the atmosphere of a period should never be held wholly responsible for the aberrations of men. But the individual who wrote these lines was a truly lonely man, a solitary figure. And while he was setting them down, the market places of Italy were being overrun with loud-mouthed barkers, offering *Theriaka*, nostrums and balsams to lengthen life; the piazzas swarmed with sorcerers, astrologers, and other mountebanks, against whom the authorities vainly issued regulations and prohibitions.

Attractive as alchemistic lore was to charlatans on account of



its utopian promises, it was doubly appealing in that even a very lazy man could readily master its jargon and imitate its technique. And the charlatans tended to superficiality. On this point a shrewd observation was made by the unknown author of the book mentioned above, on "philosophic fiends," written from the perspective of the Enlightenment. The writer is considering the career of Johann Baptiste van Helmont (1577-1664), designated a "theosophical physician" rather than an out-and-out charlatan. The experiments and writings of Van Helmont abound in alchemistic concepts; in one place, for instance, he maintains that he succeeded in producing gold during one of his tests by casting a grain of the philosophers' stone upon quicksilver. Of his methods, it is remarked: "In short, his disorderly and superficial manner of study, together with his impatience, coupled with a vivacious imagination, which made him wish to be famous and learned without effort, soon made all scholarship appear hateful to him. . . . From all this one sees the shortcomings of such fantastical men. He wanted to be learned in a brief time and easily and therefore *rushed through all the sciences without lingering by any.*" All the fraudulent alchemists had studied some other science besides alchemy and were known for a startling versatility which went far beyond the ordinary "universal" education of the savants of their day. They dashed headlong through all branches of learning and, since they preyed upon masses with an even more fragmentary knowledge, felt satisfied with their own smattering.

That alchemy was often conducive to sloth and superficiality in its followers was recognized by some critical contemporaries. This is illustrated by the scene on a beautiful white-enameled drinking goblet of the seventeenth century, reproduced here (Figs. 10 and 11), in spite of its belonging to a period later than the Renaissance, because the reproach leveled at alchemy by the rhymed motto is timeless in its application. The scene is dominated by a large distilling apparatus, in shape clearly modeled upon the alchemistic ovens; behind them stands an alchemist, not in long robes but in the fashionable costume of a gentleman of the times. Lurking among his tubes, with an avid expression on his face, he seems to be drawing toward him by hypnotic suggestion the young couple who have come to ask counsel. The husband is enterprising and lusty in appearance;

he raises the magic goblet, while his wife pulls him back anxiously, although she too seems agreeably tantalized by curiosity. Whether they seek riches, health, or the blessing of children, is not stated. But the motto sagely condemns an infatuation that leads to idleness in mankind:

With asking advice, nothing gets done,  
Unless Industry puts a hand to the work too. Year 1689.



*10 and 11. White-enameled goblet with a picture of an alchemist at his distilling apparatus and a young couple coming to seek advice. 1689.*

While the charlatans exploited the labors of the alchemists, it was not altogether with impunity. Alchemy took a somewhat sinister revenge on those who stole its secrets: the constant tribulations that accompanied the lives of the genuine students were not to be escaped by their plagiarizers. The charlatan as well as the alchemist was condemned to lead an inner life of constant turmoil, in which the bitterest disappointment alternated with intoxicated excitement; and this turbulent inner life corresponded to his outer life of swift reverses, passing by turns from



exhibitionism to concealment, from success to persecution. An element of tragedy therefore unites quack and adept. This fate is hinted at in the short verses of the baroque poet, Hofmann von Hofmannswaldau, criticizing the degeneration of alchemy in his time:

Was ist die Alchimie, als eine Kunst zu lügen?  
Was dient sie anders wohl, als Menschen zu betrügen?  
Was bringt sie dir mein Freund, als Asche, Seuffzer, Schweiss,  
Als Hoffnung, leeren Wind und Schande vor dem Fleiss?

(What is alchemy, save the art of lying? What does it serve, but to deceive mankind? What does it bring thee, my friend, save ashes, sighs and sweat, Save hopes, empty wind and shame before toil?)

Not every man who ground powders and stirred strange mixtures in a caldron was a knave and quack; but alchemy was essentially a "false art," as a Berlin pamphlet called it in 1744, and when the charlatan dabbled in such studies, he learned more than a cryptic jargon with which to amaze the crowd. He became an apprentice in "the art of lying."

# The Gold Maker Bragadino

OR

## A Case of Power over the Dispossessed

TOWARD the close of the sixteenth century, the Venetian Senate stooped to summon an alchemist to its aid. The city fathers of that strong and wise old Republic, whose constitution and laws had become models of logical clarity for other peoples, now confided in a stranger, a traveler from Cyprus reputedly skilled in making gold. And Venice itself succumbed to his spell—Venice, the home of seafarers and merchant princes, the cosmopolitan center of a wide traffic that was proudly represented, on one of the capitals of the pillared Doges' Palace, by the symbolic heads of all the peoples of Asia and Africa who traded with it. The seasoned citizens of this world port flouted their own good sense and reason by laying their gold in heaps at the feet of Bragadino, in the belief that he could multiply it. How, in such a city, can so singular an aberration be explained?

Venice found itself in a dangerous position at that time. All Italy, and Venice in particular, had been menaced by the rise to world dominance of the Hispanic-German imperial spirit. Following the discovery of America and the sea routes to the Indies, the Italians proved unable to meet the competition first of the Spanish and Portuguese, and later of the Dutch and English. The political and economic opportunities opened to these young powers through colonization were sealed to Italy. Her trade in the Near East, which had so largely belonged to Venetians, now suffered losses too great to be recouped; the credit of Italian banking houses began to waver, at first slightly and then more threateningly, while the political influence of Italy declined along with her currency. By degrees Lisbon captured the position that Venice once occupied. All this development was gradual, however, proceeding through slow stages over a period of many years. The rich Republic's economic and political reserves were not easily exhausted, and it was only in the second half of the sixteenth century that concrete evidences of the



decay became visible. Earlier, in the second and third decades of that century, important banking houses of Venice, like that of the Priuli, had failed and the Senate was forced to bring private banking under state inspection; in 1584 Venice founded the first state bank, and by the close of the century an end had been put to the old freedom in finance. This ruin of the private banks, as well as the increasingly rigid state control, may be explained partly by the fact that patrician activities were to a large extent running counter to the interests of the community as a whole; rich citizens were now withdrawing the capital they had accumulated as merchants from the private banks, taking it out of the languishing trade that no longer appeared profitable enough, to lay it away in real estate, with the hope of tapping new and privately owned sources of wealth. The transformation in the economic and the political structure of the city was accompanied by difficulties in the money market. Thus, from the economic sphere, a threat was offered to that prized stability and security which had characterized the "Serene Republic" for so many centuries; the new conditions caused slumps on the exchange and with them a general mental depression.

Besides creating this disturbance in the economic field, the growing rivals of Italy also menaced her old political order. Up to this time, Italy had remained divided into a multitude of small fragments, city-states which not only quarreled with one another but were constantly changing forms of government, moving through various phases of democracy to petty tyranny. Even under the tyrants, however, no such regimentation was practiced as in the increasingly centralized empires of the Germans, Spanish, and French. The individualism of the Italians was utterly opposed to the spirit of the great authoritarian state, unified and controlled by a powerful bureaucracy, like the France of Louis XIV; this difference was reflected in military development. The maneuverings of the *condottieri* were indeed crafty performances of no mean intellectual skill, but the Italian methods of making war emphasized the valor of the individual soldier rather than the impact of the well-disciplined mass; hence Italy was wholly unready to oppose the mighty colonizing powers which were developing a new military technique, as well as putting to use the recent invention of gunpowder.



Above all, Italy, land of a rational Humanism, the culture of the "cold heart and warm head," had so far been spared the results of the religious fanaticism which had brought untold sufferings upon the rest of Europe. The glow of the Renaissance still lingered in Rome and Venice; radiant festivals were celebrated, recalling the pageantry of the Medici. Great figures of the past survived; Titian, Palestrina, and Torquato Tasso were still alive when there began to appear in Italy, where the craft of printing had served the arts, education, and knowledge so faithfully, the first manifestations of another and more popular kind of publishing from the north of Europe. These books carried over the Alps the ferment of a changing society: northern Europe was engaged in translating into bloody actuality the schemes of pedants and reformers, evolved during the Reformation and Counter Reformation, which bound the people in servitude to religious intolerance. To those who could not submit entirely to this bondage, metaphysics offered a spiritual escape. And now, from this region of physical suffering and mystic speculation, came a profoundly upsetting influence which broke into the spiritual and political stagnation of Italian life.

While all Italy felt to some extent the fear and humiliation which accompanied declining power, Venice was especially stricken. A series of long and expensive wars in the Near East, earlier waged with profit, had begun to bring only ignominy upon the city; it suffered wounds to self-esteem along with actual loss—in 1570, Cyprus, the most valuable of the Mediterranean colonies, was taken by the Turks. The discomfiture of Venice was mocked by the French in satiric verses referring to the symbolic wedding of the Doges with the Sea:

. . . ces vieux coquz vont épouser la mer,  
dont ils sont les maris et le Turc l'adultère.

Jealously the Venetians listened to reports of the bullion shipments which Spain, the great rival, was pressing out of her colonial empire with the help of brutal soldiery. Gold must be found, they concluded, in order to restore the imperial dominion, the mastery of the sea, once held by Venice. Because the memories of former triumphs were still so fresh—an elder generation yet lived which could remember them—it was not possible for the Venetians to accept their downfall, or, facing the fact, to



study its causes soberly. Had they reflected on the matter, they would have seen that only one course was left to them: a renewal of their former activities, a stiffening of competition against the newcomers. But after so many years of comfortable existence, living on the income of accumulated fortunes, they could not go back to work. Instead, they continued to wait, indulging in the daydream of a miracle to be worked in their favor: God would surely restore the old empire, the *Monarchia*, and shower riches again on His chosen city. Basking in the glow of this dream landscape, the Venetians could forget the cold reality, the forlornness of their true situation. What these citizens, shaken in their feeling of pride and security, really desired was a justification for continued passivity; this they presently obtained from a traveled patrician of Venice, who brought back a prophecy from Poland, where he had heard it from the lips of a learned German, one Heinrich. Venice, said Heinrich, could recover her lost power at once were she fortunate enough to find a man who understood the secret art of fabricating gold. Soon after, the expected wonder worker came. He was immediately recognized, precisely because everyone had been looking for him so earnestly.

And so Mamugnà, the Cypriote, entered a city of the dispossessed. He came among a people bereft of wealth and political strength, but still clinging to the illusion of eminence. He appealed to the Venetians as they were sinking into a diseased period of their culture. For a time he held them entranced by his occult spell.

Mamugnà was born in Cyprus, sometime between 1545 and 1550, in a humble family which lived under the patronage of the noble house of Bragadino. He was therefore the client and protégé of the head of that house, Marcantonio Bragadino, defender of Cyprus against the Turks and hero of the Battle of Famagusta in 1570. As the Turks extended their sway in the Near East, a swarm of Cyprian refugees crowded into Venice, until that city groaned under its plague of exiles and the mounting expense of their maintenance. The young Mamugnà was one of these and, as it was customary at that time to take the family name of one's patron, he at first let himself be known as "Mamugnà detto [called] il Bragadino." But in 1589 we hear of a "Bragadino detto il Mamugnà" and soon afterward he dropped the Mamugnà altogether, calling himself simply



Marco Bragadino. By assuming this illustrious as well as noble name he procured credit among strangers ignorant of his origins. And so Mamugnà's career began with the forgery of his own name.

While living in Venice, still as an unknown refugee, Mamugnà formed a close friendship with Girolamo Scotto, one of those itinerant mind readers and conjurors who were then constantly being handed about from court to court and were often entrusted in their travels with diplomatic missions. A particularly fine portrait of this personage, executed upon a coin by Antonio Abondio, may be viewed in the Berlin numismatic collection. It was natural for such a man to be well versed in the occult sciences, particularly in alchemy; and indeed Scotto had been court alchemist for a period of several years in Prague, where he had been summoned by Rudolf II. Presumably it was during his intimacy with Scotto that Mamugnà picked up a smattering of alchemy and it is very likely that the same master taught him tricks of legerdemain. Not long before his death, Bragadino himself confessed that his manufacture of gold had been a mere "*destrezza di mano*," and the phrase, denoting nimbleness of finger, seems to point clearly to an apprenticeship in this art. Perhaps the misdemeanor that presently caused Mamugnà to disappear from Venice also bore some relation to his proficiency in sleight of hand; while engaged in its study, he may have practiced his finger exercises overzealously. At any rate, whatever the nature of the slip he made, it provided an impetus for travel to Florence and later to France. Here is one of the ever recurrent motifs in stories about the youth of charlatans: some misdeed, some transgression, makes it advisable for them to see the world and, at the same time, fills them with the craving to perform remarkable deeds which will attest their powers and impose on other people, all in order to return home with honor.

In 1589 Bragadino reappeared. But he was no longer the poor refugee from Cyprus—he had become a great lord. Taking up his residence in Torbiate, an obscure spot in the Brescian province, in the region of Lake Iseo, he surrounded himself with a bodyguard and a staff of servants, and exhibited hospitality on a lavish scale. His biographer, Ivo Striedinger, has gathered many contemporary observations on Bragadino which afford



a vivid picture of this brutal, masterful man and of the means he employed so knowingly to win a following and ultimately power. These methods were wholly lacking in the refinements that mark the eighteenth-century charlatan, a Cagliostro or a Saint-Germain for instance; Bragadino was a pure product of the Renaissance, without any trace of a modern neuroticism. His behavior when he first appeared in Torbiate is described in a Gradenigo manuscript:

He came to Torbiate and to Loverè by Lake Iseo, where he made a display so astonishing as to spread the report that he understood how to make gold by alchemistic practices. From there he soon returned to Torbiate in the Brescian province, and then, in the beginning of November, he moved entirely over to Brescia, where he proceeded to throw gold about him with a free hand and so furnished stuff for gossip in all the surrounding towns. . . . He did not come right out and say: "I can make gold," but he lived in so extravagant a fashion that people said: "That fellow must be able to make gold."

Such a plan of campaign is a thousand times more convincing to the public than any effort to prove, through scientific theory, that the transmutation of metals is a possibility.

For his appeal the Cypriote relied chiefly upon his own personal appearance and manner of living; he staged a seductive spectacle with his clinking coins. That method of persuasion compels the hero to remain on parade continuously, to transform his whole life into a kind of permanent exhibition, a type of showmanship to be perfected only in later times, in the century of Cagliostro and the "star" charlatans. Bragadino practiced it, however though crudely; it relieved him at the outset from the necessity of trying to collect money for his experiments. One who seeks to convince a public through argument is in the position of begging, often in vain. Bragadino did not condescend to beg or make any attempt at debate; the only cards he showed in the game were the facts of his splendid life and his pretension to a high vocation. Because he simply invited men to follow him, he received, unsolicited, all that he desired.

The first interested visitors from higher circles of society to appear in Brescia were *condottieri*: Count Giacomo Malatesta, the Count of Marignano, and Alfonso Piccolomini. At that time,



toward the close of the sixteenth century, the progress of military science had rendered the old system of small-army employers an anachronism; the *condottieri* had fallen upon evil days and were rapidly becoming little better than bandits. Marignano had scarcely established touch with Bragadino when he was forced to break off everything and retire to jail, for he had been involved in a case of poison murder and was condemned to a period of imprisonment. Piccolomini went on, however, hoping to win, by Bragadino's aid, the money he needed to finance his retaliatory campaign against the Pope and the Grand Duke of Tuscany with whom he had clashed. He dreamed of becoming master of a mighty principality. Piccolomini was the type of person who fancies that the charlatan is but a tool in his hands, an aid to his ambitious schemings, and never imagines for a moment that he is himself the useful springboard for the charlatan's own career. Repeatedly the bandit leaders sought to bear off Bragadino bodily by force of arms—it was not for nothing that he had surrounded himself with a bodyguard. Nevertheless, he was continuing to treat with the *condottieri* when another turn came in his fortunes: certain Venetian senators appeared, secret ambassadors of the Republic empowered to open negotiations, while, at the same time, the rich Duke of Mantua sent his first tokens of friendship to Brescia.

From the very beginning the cherished aim of Bragadino had been to secure the invitation to Venice. But he knew that to move too early into that city, where his actions could be scrutinized, would be fatal to his plans. If, on the other hand, he were invited to come there from Brescia, he could dictate his own conditions. The clever Cypriote accordingly had opened his campaign in the smaller town, knowing that the brilliance of his display would be greatly enhanced in the whispered legends that he himself helped to spread. Moreover, he emphasized his relations with the Duke of Mantua, with the design of convincing the Senate that it was not Bragadino who needed Venice—that city must have the alchemist at any price.

The first senators to call upon him were of high rank—the distinguished Giacomo Contarini, Nicolò Dolfino, and Giacomo Alvise Cornaro. It was Cornaro who had earlier brought back from Poland the prophecy that a savior magician was about to redeem Venice, and now that nobleman took up the alchemist's



cause warmly, making incessant appeals on his behalf and urging with fanatic zeal that he be summoned to Venice. The critics of his protégé he dismissed as "malicious." Nevertheless, a few warning voices were raised; apparently a party grouping of opponents and supporters had formed around the Cyprian wizard in the very beginning—the best proof of the efficiency of his well-calculated propaganda. The gold fabricator at once set himself to make abject followers out of these senators and their friends before Venice should send an official embassy. For their benefit he staged little informal demonstrations.

What he exhibited in this intimate way did not reflect any new technique or other additions of his own. Bragadino had merely copied at every point an old alchemistic tradition traceable to the writings of Raimundus Lullus (1234–1315). In this early work, as quoted by Striedinger, Lullus had said: "Take a pinch, the size of a bean, of this precious physic, and throw it upon a thousand ounces of quicksilver. This will then be changed into a red powder; take an ounce of this and in turn throw it upon a thousand ounces of quicksilver, and it will all be changed into physic; this process can be repeated twice more, until one finally obtains from it a gold finer than any gold won from mines." That was the system of "projection" and its supposed achievement was called "multiplication." Every alchemist—and indeed any little mountebank at a yearly market fair—knew and practiced this process, for it belonged to the current knowledge of even simpletons. But it would never have occurred to the high and mighty Senate of Venice, when it needed a savior, to invite any petty trickster of the piazzas to come at state expense and give them counsel. Although such a man would probably have known quite as much, and possibly more than the Cypriote, the latter understood better how to display his few scraps of information; amid the brilliant settings he created, the brave *condottieri* and the fastidious senators were quite carried away. Never weary of watching, they stared with respectful enthusiasm as he produced, over and over again, the identical show.

Certainly Mamugnà did not know how to fabricate gold. But it is equally certain that he did realize how to handle men, whose measure he shrewdly took. Only those witnesses were admitted who had his sanction, and naturally he chose the most easily im-



pressed natures. He would allow none but a servant of his witnesses to purchase the quicksilver. All his precautions render it very difficult to discover the exact details of his performances and to lay a finger on the method of deception he practiced. Possibly the crucible or other instruments were salted with gold, but it seems more probable that Senator Andrea Morosini's supposition was correct, that the whole triumph was based on a feat of legerdemain. In his sleeve the alchemist could have hidden a little glass pipe filled with gold dust and, at a suitable moment, have smuggled it into the retort where the quicksilver was steaming. This favorable moment, Morosini presumed, was that in which the attention of witnesses was distracted, as the gold maker took a part of the ingredients and threw them away to show their intrinsic worthlessness. The trick was carried out in a twinkling. The battle-steeled warriors noticed nothing untoward. The worshipful senators detected no fraud. They all continued to gape, seeing with their gloating eyes only what they longed to behold: the *fait accompli*, the little nugget of gold. Why should they scrutinize the methods of the magician? Leave discussion of ways and means to skeptics—they themselves were interested solely in the goal.

The first reports on Bragadino's successes reached the Venetian Senate in 1589. Through every possible channel, public opinion had been worked up in favor of the alchemist by those senators already convinced of his genius. Cornaro in particular managed to link the prophecies of the German Heinrich with the person of Bragadino in a striking manner. So the Senate decided to send a confidential envoy to Brescia, Martinengo, who was soon to join the alchemist's train as a convert. Now so near the goal of his desires, Bragadino waited with steady nerves; for propagandistic reasons, he did not move to lay his proofs before the Venetian ambassador until he was begged to do so. But he was not idle; with great skill he prepared a little extortion intermezzo, designed to heighten his reputation at just the moment when the Senate convened to make its decision.

Duke Vincent I of Mantua was a rich, pomp-loving, and extravagant prince who had made repeated visits to Bragadino in Torbiate. His interest in alchemy was not dictated by desire to alleviate the poverty of his people, but arose rather from a snobbish private pleasure in an art that had become a fad. He



was further bound to the Cypriote by a perverse relationship which made him the slave of his host. Bragadino was never weary of conducting this princely guest among his treasures and of relating marvelous stories of his own surpassing talents. At length he received a magnificent offer from the Duke to transfer his residence to the court at Mantua. Postponing a reply to this invitation, Bragadino continued to banquet the Duke and present him with splendid gifts. All the presents tendered by Vincent in return, save a few of the most worthless, he refused. Naturally, he took care that the Venetian negotiators should learn of the festival, climax of a series of dinners, at which the rarest delicacies were served, graced by the presence of fair "gentildonne" of Brescia. Everyone learned of the richly chased watch and garments with golden buttons which the Duke had pressed upon Bragadino, but no one heard that the Duke had paid out to him in secret a sum which was astoundingly high, even in view of his great wealth.

Like all charlatans, the alchemist concealed the true sources of his income and took care to present himself as the independent plutocrat, the benefactor and doer of good deeds, beholden to no man. When the Venetians grew a little restive, he soothingly assured them that he planned to teach the Mantuans merely how to achieve a 40 per cent increase in their gold—obviously a trifle. Nevertheless, the fear of Mantuan competition weighed heavily on the Senate when the hour approached for the balloting. This favored Bragadino with sixteen affirmative votes against a single negative. The decision was made, it is worthy of remark, *before* the report with the official explanations had arrived from Brescia, and even before anyone had held in his hand the tangible proof, the golden nugget. When the precious lump arrived and was tested, Bragadino was already established in Venice.

While this virtuoso in the manipulation of public emotions was still in Brescia, planning the succession of his moves with cold logic, he had engaged a trained secretary, Giulio Venturillo, who was charged with the orderly arrangement of his correspondence. The astonishingly well-made file of letters has been preserved in the Bavarian state archives, and from this complex mass of materials Striedinger compiled his biography of Bragadino. Every scrap of paper, every expense account, and



some very strange epistles may be found in that collection; among the last is one from the Duke of Mantua, revealing the true relations of that noble lord to the alchemist with unsurpassable frankness. The pedantic system observed by Bragadino for his letter file involves an apparent contradiction to what we have already said about the sloth and superficiality of the charlatan.

It is true that the quack disdains the laborious methods of the scholar. As Dr. Whitlock remarked: "It cannot be lookt for, that these Empiricall Amethodists should understand the order of Art, or the Art of order." But the charlatan is not wholly chaotic and given to wild fancies; on the contrary, his purpose is to exploit the public love of the fantastic by systematic campaigns. His real achievement lies in the sphere of propaganda, psychologically correct in appeal and admirably organized; for this a certain "Art of order" is indispensable. There may be confusion in the fields over which he has no control, in the "knowledge" he pretends to possess, in his style and speeches or anywhere that his inner emptiness becomes obvious. As far as popular appeal goes, an appearance of chaos in no way injures a man; it may often heighten his attraction. In the case of Bragadino, the letter file was a tool formed for use in the methodical part of his activities; thanks to it, we have his own productions as our most valuable pieces of evidence—the neatly ordered witnesses to his inner anarchy.

When an expert archivist like Striedinger pronounces judgment upon these documents, little need be added to the statement save the remark that, indirectly, his analysis of Bragadino's style is applicable to the style of all charlatans:

This is shown by his letters. They are miserably written and their style is poor, by any standard of criticism, forming another proof that he kept to the rule, "Write as you hear," not out of principle but because of inadequate schooling. . . . Not infrequently his images are distorted; for instance, in a letter of Dec. 10, 1590, there occur "tronco" and "ramo della pietra" [trunk and branch of the stone]. If he finds a word or expression that strikes him as beautiful or descriptive, he repeats it incessantly in order to conceal the poverty of his vocabulary. Above all, he is incapable of developing his thoughts in a definite, logical order, writing instead in the style of the uneducated—verbose, bombastic,



repetitious and without any preconceived plan. He builds sentences that lack inner connection in themselves or with one another; often he leaves out single words and sometimes whole sections of sentences. It was not his custom to make a draft or to read over what he had written.

Since the success of charlatans does not hinge on the clarity of their verbal or written proclamations, however, but rather on the exact opposite, it is not surprising that the slipshod diction of Bragadino in no way hindered his triumphal entry into Venice. He was accompanied by an armed escort which he had begged from the Senate for fear the jealous *condottieri*, begrudging him to Venice, might waylay him. For days before his arrival the city was wrought to a high pitch of excitement over the question of suitable quarters for the wonder worker. Proposals were made and rejected, until at last the splendid Casa Dandolo on the Giudecca was assigned to him. This is an indication of the popular anxiety lest the precious guest be robbed or reveal his secrets to others: an island was chosen because it would be the easiest place to guard the wizard.

At last Bragadino had reached the summit of his desires. He was lodged in a superb palace, together with his beloved Donna Laura, a lady with a stormy past. Now he could lord it over secretaries and servants; his banquets and costly garments were furnished at the expense of the Republic of Venice. Of making gold nothing further was said. He busied himself with furnishing and arranging his establishment; he feasted and formed new social connections. The effect of his propaganda was increased by well-planned appearances in public, always attended by two huge black mastiffs. Between these two monsters the sumptuously clad adventurer, whose piercing dark eyes looked out from under heavy dark brows, made an almost demoniacal impression.

Although no gold was fabricated for the time being, gold making was in the air. It became the rage. Bragadino filled the atmosphere, if not the city treasury, with the shimmer of precious metal. In an official protocol of December 17, 1589, occurs the remark: "At this time no one can procure a book on alchemy at the Library." Either on Bragadino's advice or their own initiative, some began to experiment and lose their money. The



throng of his followers grew. His true supporters, however, did not belong to the best patrician circles, to which the high-born Cornaro introduced him; from the ranks of more unfortunate nobles came men like Girolamo Contarini, poor in cash and rich in daughters, or Cornaro himself. And because fate had brought Cornaro into a situation resembling that of the dispossessed city of Venice as a whole, it would be well to look more narrowly at his character. In more than one respect that patrician was typical of the persons who in all ages have found their way to the feet of charlatans.

Giacomo Alvisé Cornaro (born in 1539) was the scion of an old and rich noble clan. He enjoyed the right of access to the Doges and stood on a footing of familiarity with the Italian princes and the King of France. For generations his family had held possessions greater than any owned by other landlords of Cyprus. The last King of Cyprus had married Caterina Cornaro (whose portrait was painted by Titian) because she belonged to this family of wealthy sugar plantation owners. When Cyprus was taken from Venice, in 1570, Giacomo Alvisé was thirty-one years old. No other family was so hard hit by the misfortune as his. It was supposed to have lost an annual income of 24,000 scudi. Crispo, agent of the Duke of Bavaria, reported to his master: "Now one cannot call this nobleman either rich or poor, but he is poor in comparison with his lost riches." Thus Cornaro found himself in the same position as the city whose patriciate he graced: dispossessed, but with the memory of the honors he formerly had enjoyed as one of the richest of men. He dreamed of renewing the old, golden splendor of his family, even as Venice itself dreamed of a recaptured empire. He clung to any illusion that would justify his own attitude of passivity mixed with resentment. With his large family he moved to Padua, near by, where living was cheaper than in Venice, and settled in a palace dating from his family's earlier period of glory. Though this palace corresponded to an economic position that no longer existed, the dignity of his rank would not suffer him to reveal the emptiness of the elaborate frame to outsiders. It is hardly remarkable that this offshoot of the family, whom Crispo called "more credulous than unscrupulous," hastened to join the apostles of a mysterious science that promised to restore the missing wealth. At first Cornaro took the chemicals which failed



him in his alchemistic experiments and worked them over into medicaments, "*medicina per corpi humani*." He cured horses with "metallic remedies" and treated his invalid wife with jewels dissolved in acids. Nobody denounced the despised lore of the doctors more violently than Cornaro—until he himself fell ill. Then none was in a more feverish haste to fetch a doctor. Hardly was he recovered than he forgot all about the physician who had helped him, and ascribed the cure to the sovereign panaceas of the adored Bragadino.

Now that Bragadino was installed in Venice, the rumors about his powers continued to spread. From the mainland and even from distant cities, pilgrims began to stream into Venice, the spot honored with the presence of so great a man. His supporters were still in the great majority. The few carping tongues were easily dismissed as "malicious" or "stupid." To the "stupid" belonged, among others, the jurist and historian of Treviso, Giovanni Bonifacio. He reported in a letter to a friend in Verona that the persons were few indeed who thought the Cyprian a swindler, while the majority took him for a shining light among alchemists, bound to fill the civic treasury with gold. "Therefore many highly esteemed personages run after him, in the hope that he will pay their debts. They pay court to him and give him adulation to the point of worship. The lowest form of address they employ is *Illustrissimo*." That was the designation of cardinals, but Cornaro found it insufficient and wrote "*Vostra Eccellenza*" instead, a title that even a Cosimo de' Medici assumed only when he received ducal dignity. The enthusiasts heaped presents as well as honor on Bragadino: "From all sides, and sometimes from princes, the gifts came. Coal, bellows, distilling apparatuses, handbooks on alchemy—everything has mounted enormously in price. Everyone is blowing upon his glowing fires and entering the trade of mammon maker. I realize that you will now expect an opinion from me: very well, I do not believe in him at all, and least of all as far as the branch of alchemy is concerned."

Still Bragadino did not trouble himself about producing gold. But there now appeared on the scene an antagonist which shook the nerves of the wonder worker for the first time: the mocking laughter of the people. From public squares and bridges, after a few months, resounded a folk ditty; it was trilled from bal-



conies and from gondolas. Like most charlatans, Bragadino could not comprehend a joke touching his own person; he lacked the necessary security of mind, was void of humor, and incapable of regarding himself with irony. And so he lodged a protest with the Senate. The murmuring and whispering of the ill disposed, so he wrote, had robbed him of the peace of soul that he must have for his high labors. But he achieved nothing by this thrust. In Italy no attempts were made to prohibit songs and satires; such decrees would not have curbed the gay impulsiveness of this skeptic people. And so Bragadino as a last resort engaged a panegyrist to praise him and Donna Laura, a poet who, echoing Giacomo Stagni's disdain of the intellect, said that he scorned anyone who could turn out good verses.

If the senators harbored doubts, they were not so blithely expressed as those in the stanzas of popular ballads. But a few of the noble lords hazarded the remark that if Bragadino indeed understood how to fabricate gold, it was not in sufficient quantities. And so nothing was left for Bragadino but to have recourse once more to sleight of hand. In the state mint, the Zecca, he had deposited a flask of the wonder-working substance supposed to bring about "multiplication"; the flask had been received with due ceremony and was stored away in a sealed casket in the vaults of the mint; moreover, a protocol had been composed on the entire lofty procedure. And now, closely pressed by the "rich gluttons, swollen with their stupidity," as he called the patrician skeptics, Bragadino decided to take a further step and hand over to the Zecca a written description of his processes; this document, wrapped with a cord like a bundle of letters and sealed with four wax seals, was transferred amid similar rituals. When some murmurers finally indicated a wish to see the color of gold as well, Martinengo explained to experts sent by the Senate—and thereby voiced the opinion of the whole retinue of fascinated adherents—that pressure would not bring results with Bragadino: "He must always be handled with mildness, that is the best way to get along with him. We should assure him of the good intentions of this state body, for he is possessed of so restive and changeable a spirit that often, when we have persuaded him to a certain thing, we find him wholly altered the next day, yes, sometimes not merely from day to day but so to speak, from hour to hour." Descending to details, Martinengo



announced, on behalf of Bragadino, that the flask in the mint contained all that existed of this precious substance; that Bragadino was willing to use it all up at once, should he be compelled, but that this seemed unwise. The intention was to increase the substance gradually; in forty-five months the first multiplication would be carried out and after that, in another forty-five months, would come a second process; that would make ninety months altogether and a thirty-fold increase, so that the flask would yield a store of gold. But ninety months! Seven and a half years would be required for this multiplication which was supposed to be going on all the while, removed from scrutiny, within the casket! That meant seven and a half years of high living at Venetian expense.

There were some shrewd men who realized the game that was being played. Among them was Paolo Sarpi, the renowned historian of the Council of Trent, whose cool Roman intellect seconded the laughing Roman skepticism of the common people. With great skill he had represented the Republic in its embittered legal strife with the Holy See and, shortly before Bragadino's triumphal entry, he had returned to his home in Venice. Sarpi loved to make fun of astrologers, in whose powers he had no belief at all. Urged to witness the performances of Bragadino, he merely smiled. He could not even summon enough interest to go and look at the marvel—in short, he was one of the few men genuinely impervious to the charlatan's spell. But because it hurt him to see Venice making a laughingstock of itself, he decided to do his share toward undermining the popularity of the alchemist. Since he was a skeptic, he did not utter orations filled with sentiment; instead, he went to work in a satiric spirit.

On the occasion of a masked festival, certain young aristocrats, acting upon his advice, presented themselves to the public upon a gondola loaded with retorts, bellows, and other implements of the craft. One of them, dressed to impersonate the god Mammon, kept shouting like a crier at a country fair: "A tre lire soldo d'oro fino!"—that is to say, the humbug Bragadino would take three lire of good gold and return only one soldo of his own metal. As time went on, the laughter began to dispel some of the awe that surrounded the charlatan. The singers of dialect ditties took heart and raised their voices with an increasingly impertinent lilt. One refrain in particular, "O che sorte ha

sta Città" (O what luck this city has!), had a defiant ring; it mocked, it threatened. In this amusing song, the choicest of all those collected by Striedinger, there were seventeen strophes, of which the first ran:

Voglio zente che cantemo  
e che Dio noi ringratiemo  
che sta ventura ello ne ha dà:  
O che sorte ha sta Città;

(I desire, O people, that we should sing and give thanks to God because he has so favored us: O what luck this City has!)

The sixth verse referred to the forgery that Bragadino had earlier committed in changing his name, and the circumstances were given a playful twist:

Il signor Marco è il suo nome  
Bragadin il suo cognome  
Mamugnato el vien chiamà  
O che sorte ha sta Città;

(Signor Marco is his name; Bragadin is his other name. He is called the Mamugnat. O what luck this City has!)

His maneuver in keeping the two mastiffs is mocked by another verse:

L'ha do cani che sè belli  
Et alcuni vuol che quelli  
siano tutti indemonià:  
O che sorte ha sta Città;

(He has two dogs which are handsome, and many say they are bewitched. O what luck this City has!)

The last verse sums up his performances and concludes with the melancholy foreboding:

Si chè temo grandemente  
che del tutto sarà niente  
E tutti resterà chiappà



Nè più sorte se haverà  
Falalilela, falalilà.

(Ah, I greatly fear that nothing will come of all this, and everybody will be taken in and no one will have luck again. Falalilela, falalilà.)

The refrain "Falalilela, falalilà" was used by the people of Venice to greet unfortunates who went into bankruptcy or appeared insolvent. Bragadino was now himself dangerously near that brink. Driven into a corner by his enemies, he let them drag a promise from him that he would produce the equivalent of 100,000 scudi in gold. Once committed to such concrete promises, he realized very clearly that nothing was left to him but flight from Venice. And so while he kept postponing his "multiplication," he was busy preparing for departure. Day by day the popular mood grew more threatening; the whispering and muttering now disturbed him very seriously indeed in his "lofty labors" and his creditors heaped up complaints against him. Bragadino then changed his residence to Padua, accepting the home of the loyal Cornaro, a move which was tantamount to a retreat. The whole little court, Donna Laura and the rest of the numerous family, Venturello and the servants, accompanied him. And there in Padua, in the moment of his greatest need, salvation reached him in the form of an invitation to Munich from Duke William V of Bavaria though the Italian princes and the King of France, to whom he had offered his services, had declined with thanks. Bragadino journeyed alone over the Alps. In his first letter back to the homeland, he employs the pathetic phrases of a dethroned potentate: "Whoever wishes to come to me, let him do so; who does not, should stay quietly where he is. I call to every one of my friends: who loves me, follows me." Donna Laura and some servants accordingly soon joined him.

In Bavaria a completely insolvent court awaited the arts of the gold maker. The Duke had inherited a huge burden of debts from his father; he was very extravagant himself and decidedly simple-minded as well. As he had made heavy outlays without asking the court treasurer, he found himself in difficulties which explain his warm insistence that the wonder worker should come quickly. The Duke was in a much more serious situation than



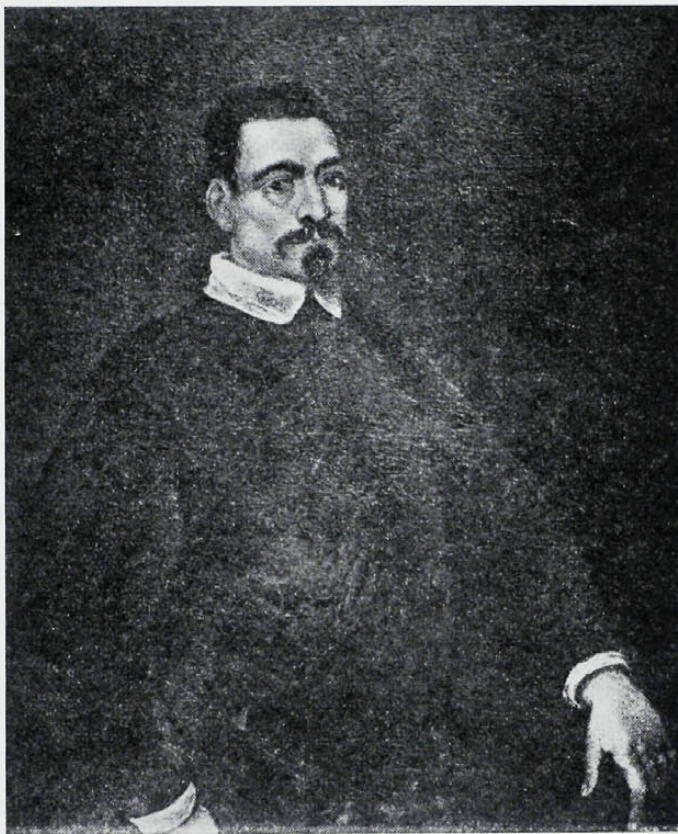
Venice, for he was menaced with bankruptcy. Besides, the ailing man hoped for a cure through the philosophers' stone in Bragadino's possession. Alchemy had come into fashion in Munich, through the efforts of Leonhard Thurneisser, and the Duke had already shown an interest in the art when he was younger. The atmosphere was therefore favorable to Bragadino. His grand entry into Munich was far more triumphal than his reception by Venice, just a year before. Riding upon a Barbary steed, he displayed clothes of velvet, silk, and the finest linen; he was sprinkled with perfumed waters and covered with ornaments.

On his arrival he occupied himself, as he had done in Venice, with settling himself in his residence. He ordered choice furniture and delicacies from Italy, for the German cooking did not meet his taste. He gave Hans von Aachen a commission to paint the portrait which has been preserved and may be seen today in the Castle of Ambras near Innsbruck (Fig. 12). At the upper right of the picture is an inscription hailing the Cyprian as the inventor of the alchemic art: *Marco Bragadino inventor di far l'oro*. The appearance of the alchemist reflects the dictates of Spanish fashion. The short-cropped, high-combed hair, the small moustache, the dark silken splendor of the garments—all this is purely Spanish and tends to cover rather than reveal individual traits. But the essential nature of Bragadino is revealed by the receding brow and the brutal line running from the nose down to the sensuous mouth. The glance from under the thick, dark brows is icy cold, the look of a master impostor, driven restlessly onward by his inner daemon. In this portrait of planned, energetic unscrupulousness, there is a suggestion of criminal propensities but not a trace of humor.

The Bavarian drama unfolded much like that in Venice, but in this case it was not a whole city that was gripped by fever. The victim of hallucination was a single, ailing man, not entirely competent mentally, who stood at the head of the state. Bragadino's intimacy with the Duke was close and they busily conducted experiments together. The Bavarian ministers and statesmen were hostile to the alchemist; but the people remained mute, for it is only in romance lands that the satiric popular song can become an important, even decisive opponent. In Munich, Bragadino ventured into more daring schemes than in Venice; he meddled with the commercial policies of the state, endeavoring



to secure orders for grain delivery on a large scale for Venice, through Bavaria. While he treated his Italian friends with ingratitude, he felt bound to Venice itself; homesickness is one of the few genuine sentiments evinced by charlatans, and is to be encountered again and again in their life stories. Very soon after his arrival in Bavaria, we find him writing to Cornaro: "As soon



12. *Portrait of the alchemist, Marco Bragadino.*

*By Hans von Aachen, 1590.*

as I hear that people there have changed their minds about me, I hope that I may again serve my liege Prince, as I had intended to do. And I think that, however distant the place where I may linger for a time, nevertheless the gleaming rays of the talents with which God has endowed me may shine so far."

After the business of the grain shipments, conducted by the Cypriote in as fraudulent a fashion as all his other operations,

the clouds began to gather ominously about his head. He had brought the Duke to such a pass that he did not hesitate to swindle a Bavarian nobleman out of a fine jewel; the ministers now resolved to prepare for the fall of Bragadino, behind the back of his infatuated master. Suspicious at last, and utterly dismayed, William V wrote to his former High Chancellor, Rudolf von Haslang: "Dear von Haslang! Unforeseen events have transpired, touching Bragadino, and there is great danger in delay in some of these matters, but above all it is needful that such things be held in the greatest secrecy and silence for the time being." There was no possibility of help from Venice, for the people of that city had already forgotten Mamugnà, save in their comic songs, although the faithful Cornaro still wrote to him: "In your person are mirrored the weightiest concerns of human existence." And at last the Duke could save his favorite no longer. In April, 1591, the charlatan met death by the executioner's ax.



## Leonhard Thurneisser, a Scientific Charlatan

THE brevity of Bragadino's career is one of its singular features; within the remarkably short space of about two years the Cyprian impostor had tasted success and met his ignominious end. Life stories in which the action attains so dramatic a concentration are very rare. Usually the frame of time is wider and the figures on the stage are correspondingly blurred, often dwindling to barely recognizable shadows in the tradition handed down. Seldom indeed are a hero and his antagonist, his victims and the opportunities to lure and capture them, all to be found so close together within a given historical situation. For that reason, Bragadino's Venetian sojourn has been treated here in detail; this small episode, like a lens which catches diffused light rays, reflects the most various images and influences, affording a clear view of the methods of a charlatan and the conditions, human and historical, that favor the growth of his peculiar power. But other personalities, other stories might be selected as even more typical of the age. The Renaissance permitted many a humbug, like Leonhard Thurneisser zum Thurn (1530-96), to lead a long vagrant existence, stringing one charlatanic adventure after another and building up a reputation on the basis of sham studies and dubious performances.

The family of Thurneisser belonged to the ruling patrician circles of Basle. As apprentice or *Famulus* in the household of Doctor Johann Huber, Thurneisser became acquainted with the teachings of Paracelsus and later pursued desultory studies in other towns. During his youth, interest in the philosophic faculty, the *artes liberales*, was waning. A new generation was growing up which turned to natural science and speculation in natural philosophy with the same determined enthusiasm shown by the older Humanists, a century or so before, when they abandoned the scholastic problems of the Middle Ages and embarked on discussions of style, philology, and ethics. The contemporaries of Thurneisser were fumbling with various mathematical, medical, and technical questions which appeared incomprehensible to the now aging Humanists, and were in any case decidedly



obscure. The natural sciences were on the verge of becoming fashionable and it is the function of the charlatan to be a pioneer, building a bridge for the public to every fresh scientific fad.

In dealing with the facts of natural science, a greater amount of organization and specialization than before was necessary; the older type of "universal" Humanist, the versatile dabbler in all branches of learning, found himself gradually excluded by the scientific expert, who gave lectures on cabalistic lore, chiromancy, and astrology, and regarded himself and his tasks with the utmost seriousness. The new dignity accorded to scientific inquiry, the revaluation of its purpose and problems, tended to produce a pedantic "mere-scientist," a man of erudition who gave himself *ein sonderbares Ansehen von Würde*, a peculiar air of dignity, and gravely enthroned himself in the lecture room, deaf and blind to the realities of life. It is easy to see why such a type evoked the mockery of the masses, and how the charlatan, pointing at the caricature, could urge everyone to join the chorus of his "song of triumphant raillery at reason and science."

A companion type to the pedant had arisen at the same time, however, in the person of the genuine scientist, the earnest seeker after knowledge, deeply moved by the ideal of impartiality and integrity. Severe in setting himself tasks and evaluating their results, such a man measures his own performances by the highest and most rigid standards. These qualities distinguish him and not myopic obliviousness of the world or a "peculiar air of dignity." The gulf between this true student and the charlatan is spiritual, not geographic, for the former is no more necessarily associated with universities or mere erudition than the quack is to be found only in the booths of country fairs. When eighteenth-century writers declared that quacks could be found in all walks of life, and that the name was applicable to merchants and politicians as well as to artisans, architects, artists, and philosophers, they indirectly implied that the genuine worker and student might be met also in every field. Whatever his chosen profession, the man of honor, incorruptible and modest, sets up a standard by his character and actions; judged by this standard, the charlatan is revealed as such. For it is only possible to define charlatanry by comparison with its opposite; one cannot apply the name of quack to a doctor, for example, unless one can point to some other physician who approaches the ideal of sincerity



and self-sacrifice. Only against the background of serious science does quackery assume a sharp silhouette.

When the genuine does not exist, simulation does not pay. Talmi, that gold-plated alloy of copper and zinc used to fashion cheap jewelry, is manufactured because true gold is valued. The high esteem in which art is held by mankind is what creates the



13. *Leonhard Thurneisser zum Thurn (1530–96) of Basle, an alchemist and charlatan welcomed at many courts.*

demand for a cheap substitute, for talmi art. So, too, talmi science, the pseudo knowledge of the quack, was an imitation produced only when modern science had outgrown its primitive stage and the ideal of the scientist was assuming definite shape. This turning point came toward the close of the sixteenth century. In its earlier decades the Renaissance had created an atmosphere favorable to vagrant adventurers, to mummery and imposture; but though the charlatan had arrived, the concept of chalatanry still remained vague. When the Renaissance had almost run its course, however—when Galileo appeared, deter-



mined to pursue his researches despite persecution—then the ideal figure of the truth seeker was brought forth. His life became the standard which made it possible, by inference, to judge quacks and condemn quackery.

One essential trait of the quack, his hatred of logically developed ideas, is pointed out by the biographer of Thurneisser, Moehsen, who emphasizes the chaotic character of that alchemist's researches:

He attacked his studies in a laborious, but tumultuous and disordered way. He shared the fate of all those who embark upon a science without schooling and methodic habits. He regarded as new and amazing any fact he had not known before, and was sure that he was the first to discover it. Through his want of basic knowledge he was unable to make use of his experiences and build them up into a reasonable structure of thought; he formed many false concepts which nobody before him had entertained, and therefore proclaimed nearly everything he wrote to be new and unparalleled.

In thus setting apart the methodical worker from the man who collects facts in a state of disordered ebullience, Moehsen reveals one of the striking characteristics of the charlatan: he is the foe of systematic thought. He is not incapable of planning campaigns and organizing the efforts of his underlings; indeed, the specific contribution of the charlatan is the transfer of system from the acquisition of knowledge to the realm of propaganda. But his own "want of basic knowledge," as Moehsen puts it, remains a weakness; it entails an inability to classify and order facts and experiences, a lack of measuring rods. Through failure to acquire this grounding, or through some defect of character, the charlatan thus loses his sense of proportion; he suffers from disturbances of equilibrium, tends to exaggerate and lay false emphasis upon some facts to the neglect of others, thus forming hardened prejudices. Any stray bits of knowledge or personal experiences he may meet therefore take on an importance for his future life out of all proportion to their true significance.

Such an experience marked the youth of Thurneisser, according to the story told by Moehsen. At seventeen he had married a widow in Basle. A citizen of that town, Schönengel, had borrowed money from certain Jews of Wiel and, wishing to conceal the fact, used Thurneisser as a screen, getting him to pay the



interest on the debt. Disorderly as he was, Thurneisser neglected to obtain proper receipts and at the end of the year the usurers charged up to him the entire sum of the interest due. Forced to put up security, the unhappy young man found himself deep in debt. In revenge he resorted to this device: "He took a small piece of lead, coated it with gold and handed it to the Jews of Wiel as pure fine gold, thus getting back the objects he had given in pawn." The deceit was discovered and its perpetrator was forced to leave Basle. Years passed. Thurneisser, become rich and honored, resided in Berlin. He had reached the goal of his ambitions—but what was that? A contemporary declared:

His house was like a Lombard [pawnshop]. And in his own body there dwelt the soul of a great and busy usurer who first moved into that abode after he had won a fortune in this land. Whoever needed money and had security sent it to him to be pledged. The Elector had driven the Jews from the land. Thurneisser, who had paid his apprenticeship fee to the Jews of Wiel, replaced them after their departure: he took high rates of interest and rigidly observed the moment when payments fall due and the pledges, which were far higher in value than the money lent on them, were forfeit; and he did not allow himself to be moved by pleas. Among these pledges were some from the most distinguished councillors of the Elector.

When Thurneisser had been compelled to flee from his native town, he had made his way in England and France by the help of a craft he had learned from his father, that of the goldsmith, and in addition busied himself as an engraver of heraldic crests. This skill supported him through ten roving years, and in 1552 he entered Germany as a mercenary soldier in a band of *Landsknechte*. Returning to Switzerland, he dissolved his marriage in Constance and promptly remarried. He was then twenty-eight years old. Accompanied by his wife, he went to Tyrol, where he entered a mining scheme, opening a smelting oven in Tarrenz, near Imst. Products from the bowels of the earth have exercised a noteworthy attraction on charlatans of all times; they are often to be found as superintendents of mines or discoverers of healing mineral springs. The undertaking in Tarrenz was crowned with such success that Archduke Ferdinand of Austria sent him to study mining and smelting methods in Scot-



land, Spain, Portugal, and the East. Thurneisser's commission in the East was supposed to be a search for the secrets of the Oriental "adepts," the masters of esoteric wisdom. He seems to have busied himself, however, less with the adepts and their arcana than with collecting secret prescriptions and medical treatises, for his interest in the art of healing was awakened by travel. As a physician, a changed man in the costume of an exotic sage, he returned to Tyrol in 1565, announcing his call to heal mankind—an assumption of a call from on high which is the usual substitute for a legitimate position gained through knowledge. His writings, *Archidoxia*, *Quinta Essentia*, and *Pison*, crammed with absurdities and mystifying hints, quickly found him a new princely patron, the Elector of Brandenburg. Thus a mere adventurer, who was a doctor only by virtue of his "call," was summoned straightway to Berlin as court physician; a laboratory was set up for his use in a monastery of the Minorites. Here the wanderer settled down and prospered; he had to engage twelve secretaries to manage his correspondence. He received the Elector hospitably, as well as statesmen, scholars, and artists, in his splendidly appointed mansion. Like Bragadino, he realized how far sumptuous banquets, an array of retainers, and stateliness of manner and surroundings can go toward dazzling the public. His medicines and secret remedies sold at fabulous prices; the healing panacea, "potable gold," was particularly sought after. He also proposed to fish for precious gems in the rivers of the Mark Brandenburg, which had in fact occasionally produced a few fresh-water pearls. Very remunerative, also, was the casting of horoscopes in which he was an expert. No sooner had he foreseen a peril in the planets, threatening some wealthy personage, than he proffered a talisman to avert it. Gottfried, Count zu Oettingen, sent a full hundred imperial florins for "the prepared horoscope and the alchymia magna." Soon the demands of this branch of his business overtaxed the strength of Thurneisser; he had to take on more trained help and open his own print shop to produce his works.

Science in the guise of two professors at last encompassed his fall. It is indicative of the state of contemporary medicine that the learned doctors who attacked him did not go so far as to doubt his triumphs; in their polemical pamphlets they merely accused him of practicing magic and accepting diabolic assist-



ance, thus incidentally revealing that the two eminent authors had not questioned the charlatan's pretensions in the least. Their insinuations, however, as well as the fact that he was unable to fabricate gold in large quantities or discover fruitful fishing grounds for jewels in the rivers of Brandenburg, at length



*14. A coin supposedly made from the seven metals and able to avert various diseases. Such coins were produced and sold by Thurneisser.*

caused mutterings against Thurneisser; it was high time for him to retreat.

In his writings repeated references are made to mysterious enemies who thwarted his designs. All charlatans have had secret foes of one sort or another whom they drag in to explain their failures; many an embarrassing move or retreat may thus be accounted for as an effort to ward off hostile forces. In Thurneisser's case it was a hidden demon, lurking in one of the twelve houses of his horoscope, that he fought in vain; it could not be exorcised by any talisman. In reality, this was probably the old demon of homesickness that bedeviled Thurneisser with an extraordinary longing to see his native land again; during one attack of nostalgia, he yielded to the temptation to move back to Basle. But the paternal city brought him only misfortune. He married there for a third time, the daughter of a patrician; soon, however, he sought separation from her, and, with the case, he lost fortune and prestige. Recommencing his wanderings, he

traveled from town to town, never encountering success again, and died in 1596 in a monastery of Cologne.

The winged horse in his heraldic crest sustains a globe: men of Thurneisser's stamp, condemned to suffer rapid reverses, to alternate between triumph and trial, are harried over the earth by need and not by zest for knowledge alone. But the fleeing charlatans of the Renaissance had not yet learned to connect their tales of travel with a recital of a proud lineage, extending into remote centuries and a mythical past. Neither Bragadino nor Thurneisser served up such fables. To marvel at legendary age and pedigree remained for later times, for generations even more deeply shaken than the sixteenth century in their feeling of security.



### III

## POWER THROUGH PROPAGANDA





## The Evolution of the Medicine Show

THAT there are two sorts of charlatans and that the one may be clearly differentiated from the other was maintained by an eighteenth-century court physician to the King of Poland, F. L. de la Fontaine. In the Seventh Epistle of his *Chirurgisch-medizinischen Abhandlungen*, published at Breslau and Leipzig in 1792, wherein he deals with "Charlatans, Cheats, Ignoramuses, Hangmen, Midwives, etc.," the author makes a significant remark: "What is said here touches indeed only the higher charlatanism, for the ordinary and everyday sort is common enough here." So marked a distinction, and one so consciously drawn, can hardly be matched in contemporary literature. It is interesting to note that when De la Fontaine speaks about the higher charlatans and tries to interpret personalities of the class of Cagliostro, he chooses a metaphor from the field of "ordinary and everyday" quackery, declaring that "none of the great charlatans succeeded in setting up his booth here." Neither Cagliostro nor the Count de Saint-Germain ever set up a booth or pitched a tent, in the days of his greatness, to be sure; but the fact that an observer capable of such precise formulations as this Polish court physician should have introduced a metaphor fresh from the market place is a reminder that we should not lose sight of these humble peddlers practicing their commonplace daily deceptions. Figurative language can be understood fully only when we keep in mind the concrete transactions of the lower mountebank or "Cheap Jack."

Comparisons of this sort are used repeatedly by Johann Burckardt Mencken in his *De Charlataneria Eruditorum* (1716), a series of lectures devoted chiefly to denunciation of the malpractices then gaining ground among scholars and savants. After summarizing the errors he seeks to censure, Mencken declares: ". . . quae cuncta dum recta lance perpendimus, haud aliter profecto comparata videntur, atque Empiricorum deliria, qui ut miseram plebem illiciant, ac fallant, mimos et praestigatorum omne genus, simiasque et mures alpinos alunt, atque inter haec jactantes sua pharmaca, panacaeas, emplastra,



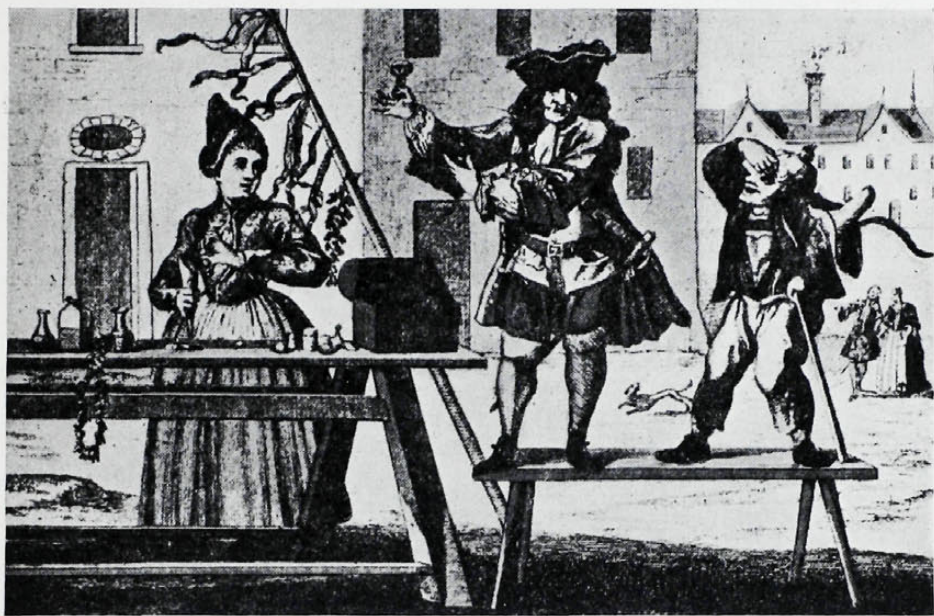
spectatorum marsupia calidissime emungunt" (when we consider all this carefully, it will appear to be nothing but a dervish dance of charlatans who, in order to attract the mob, execute all sorts of juggling and comedian's tricks, keep apes and marmots, and, during these shows, extol their potions, cry up their plasters and specifics and drain the purses of the spectators). Mencken becomes even clearer in the following analogy: "*Charlatani, ut merces suas majori vendant, ceterorum medicamina contemnunt et invidiosissimis tractant nominibus: id quod jam olim proverbio locum fecit: Medicus medico invidet. Quis jam dubitat literatos illos vocare Charlatanos, qui eundem morem sua in arte sequuntur?*" (In order to sell their wares to the better advantage, charlatans deprecate the medicaments of others and give them spiteful names. This has long since given rise to the popular saying: A doctor speaks ill of doctors. Who can still doubt, then, that one will have to classify as charlatans those savants who resort to such methods in their respective fields?)

Although the type of the "higher" charlatan may have undergone great changes in the course of centuries, this was not true of his colleague of the market fairs, who remained unaltered in appearance and general make-up. The objects he offered for sale, the promises he made, might indeed vary with the prevailing tastes of the public to which he adapted his appeals with an expert intuition; but the charlatans regarded their wares and promises as of slight importance. Their major concern was with the method of propaganda and that did not alter in essentials. Indeed, the "higher" charlatan himself modified his character only so far as was necessary to conform to the wishful thinking of his contemporaries, while many of his fundamental traits survived, for the mental equipment which enables a man to make a career of quackery remains much the same in all ages.

What, then, did the charlatan do first when he appeared in the turmoil of the market place? He wanted to be seen; he must elevate himself above the crowd. His natural stature being insufficient, he resorted to artificial aid: he sprang upon a bench. "Mountebank," "he who jumps on a bench," is the English term corresponding to the French and Italian expressions, "*saltimbanque*" and "*saltimbanco*." With this first visible action, the charlatan captured the attention of the audience, the prime injunction of every kind of advertising; as Samuel Butler wrote



in 1678: "Charlatans can do no good, Until th' are mounted in a Crowd." But once all eyes were fixed on him, he had to hold his audience by costuming and stage effects. And he must be heard as well as seen immediately; and so the charlatan began to speak, or rather scream, as soon as he gained the bench, in order to overreach others by his voice as well as his figure. To



15. A charlatan, a clown, and a woman selling medicines. The charlatan is seen standing on the bench; this characteristic pose earned him the popular name of "saltimbanco," "saltimbanque," or "mountebank" (he who mounts a bench).

*Engraving of the eighteenth century.*

this he owed his German name of *Marktschreier* (market crier), and the onomatopoetic English term, "quack." Skeat maintains in his etymological dictionary that a quack is one "who makes a noise like a duck."

Two naïve representations of quacking mountebanks may be studied in the pictures reproduced here (Figs. 15 and 16), one a German engraving of the eighteenth century and the other an oil painting of a busy scene in the square before the Milan Cathedral. In both, the details of gesture and expression are so





16. *A mountebank on a wooden bench.*

*Detail from a painting of an unknown artist, portraying  
construction work on the façade of the Milan Cathedral.  
Circa 1655.*



well rendered as to illustrate admirably the definition of the "sources of charlatanism" from the *Encyclopédie méthodique*, of 1787, mentioned earlier: "When it [the imagination] paints the object that is for sale in lively colors, it wrests applause from us. Reason remains mute and no longer abides with us. Often we yield blindly and without reflection, for it robs us of the freedom to discuss and judge. Above all, it succeeds in invading our minds with its magic, gently and flatteringly, through the paths of sight and hearing."

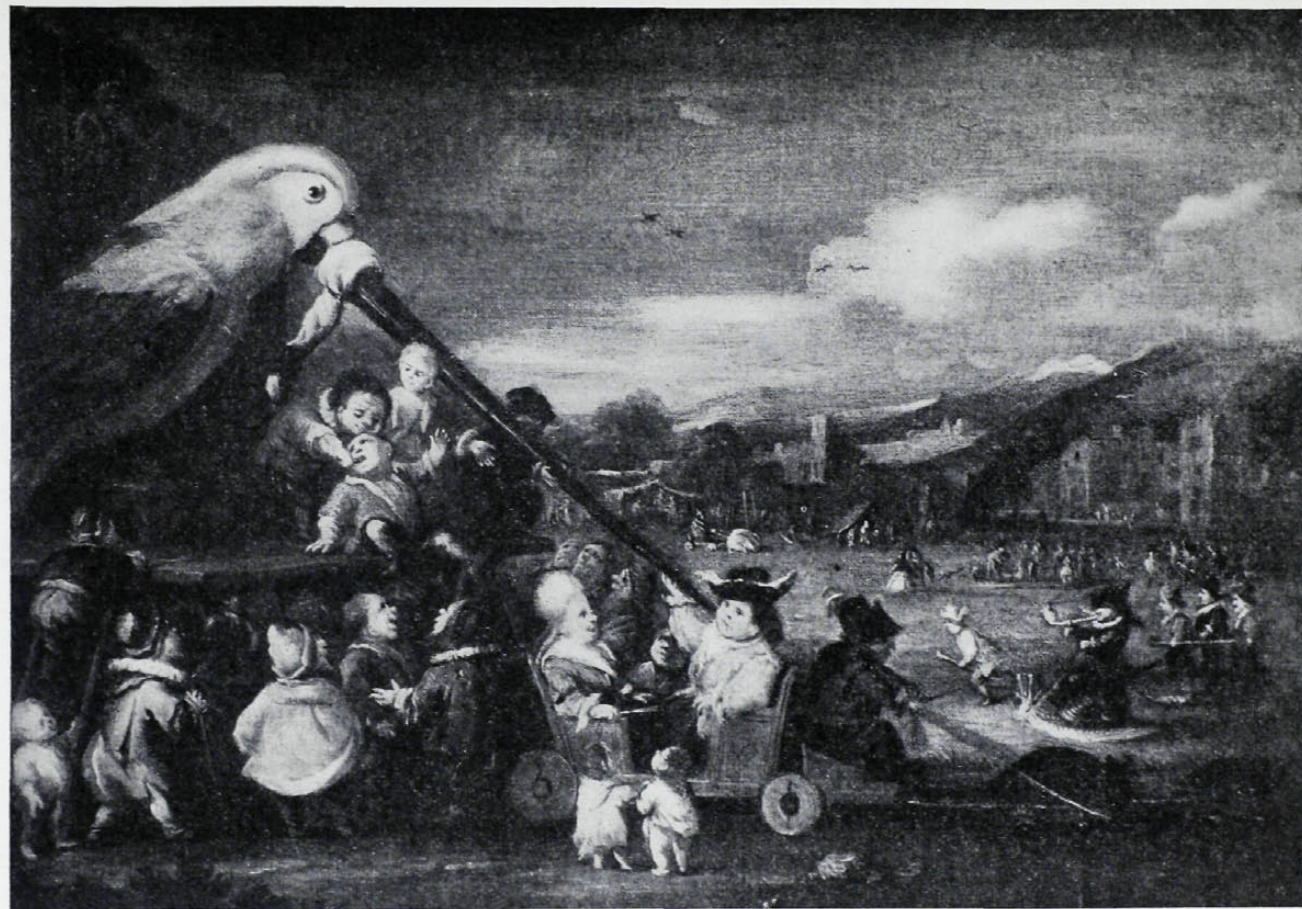
The eyes and ears of the public are fully occupied by the performances of the quacks in these two chosen pictures, although they offer only the most modest of equipment and shows. In the cathedral square of Milan, as in the German market place, the charlatan has two helpers, a woman and a clown. Their function is to entice the passers by to stop and stand awhile; and although the chief of the little troupe continues to advertise his plasters and ointments—with discreet composure in the case of the Italian, with greater pomposity in that of the German—it almost appears as though the harlequin and ballad singer were endeavoring to distract attention from the patter of the quack. For they are compelling people to buy and at the same time deterring them from purchasing. They know that customers will buy at just the moment when they have forgotten that they are supposed to do so. Medicines, salves, and pills are being "puffed" to the skies, but the people hardly hear the news while they are engrossed in listening to the songs of the woman and the jests of the zany, or marveling at the feats of a juggler, tightrope walker or fire swallower. Here one touches a secret of this propaganda's power: the elaborate shows have no integral connection with the articles for sale—be they "elixirs or opinions"—but they serve to woo the buyers or followers without letting them perceive what is really going on. The staging must carefully avoid allusion to the intentions of the leader.

It would be false to conclude from the foregoing that the quack employed such methods with a clear awareness of their value. On the contrary, his methods were formed gradually and unconsciously out of the customs of the times, and each new trick was adopted because time proved its effectiveness. For that reason trained animals were added to the exhibitions and often were entrusted with such tasks as selecting talismans, or slips of



paper, with horoscopes written on them; these creatures were intended to concentrate the public's attention upon themselves and distract it from the true aim, the peddling of patent nostrums. Mencken mentions apes and marmots as favorites of the traveling shows, but the parrot should not be forgotten. This bird appears in giant size, corresponding to its importance, in a picture by Michelangelo Cerquozzi, also known as Michelangelo delle Bambocciate (Fig. 17), that sixteenth-century Roman artist who painted a series of imaginary incidents in a world populated only by dwarfs. Here a popular festival is obviously being celebrated: booths and tents are pitched in the rear of a piazza over which the tiny folk are hurrying, one riding upon a snail and others in little wagons drawn by mice or rabbits. Conspicuous in the foreground is the platform made of planks, on which stands a tooth extractor who has just got his hands on a patient. Kicking with pain and fear, the victim turns to the dental artist as though pleading for help. But the latter is bending over him with a superior smile, while the woman, who must not be lacking even on a pygmy podium, is making one of those stereotyped gestures to the public, inimitably empty and conventional, that bareback riders execute after their acts to thank the audience for its patience. This gesture transforms the patient into what he appears on every booth—an object for demonstration, a part of the advertising scheme. But he has already served his turn and the management has diverted the attention of the crowd from him again, lest he should cry out too loudly, or even burst into tears, and so spoil business. The public accordingly has forgotten all about the poor fellow and is now gaping at the parrot instead. All the grotesque little faces are lifted toward the gigantic bird elevated above them like a monstrous idol. Through a huge speaking tube, the parrot is foretelling the future in the ear of a diminutive nobleman, who has come in a carriage, sitting beside an elegant midget lady. The expression of tension, sensuality, and fear, the greedy lust for sensation upon the face of this female companion, are rendered with uncanny skill. The whole scene is so fascinating that one who views the picture is himself in some danger of forgetting that teeth are being drawn here: he, too, falls under the spell of the parrot and feels that atmosphere of impending doom which has so enchanted the little dwarf lady.





17. *The toothdrawer*, by a Roman painter of scenes from the life of dwarfs, shows a crowd of the little creatures gathering about a toothdrawer and his fortune-telling parrot. Wonder and greed for the sensational are apparent on the tiny faces.

By Michelangelo Cerquozzi, called Michelangelo delle Bambocciate. Middle of the seventeenth century.



The quacks soon learned to play on such emotions of dread or horror with great skill. How well they turned repulsive and shocking sights into attractions may be seen from an early account of their performances in the *Piazza universale delle pazzie*, written by Tomaso Garzoni and published at Venice in 1616. The scene is a public square, invaded by Mastro Paolo d'Arezzo, offering his infallible cure for snakebite: "He takes the field with a large banner, bearing upon one side a picture of St. Paul and upon the other a nest of serpents." And immediately he begins to tell a story of his fabulous lineage, tracing it back to St. Paul who entrusted the secret of brewing the antidote to his descendants; in his family alone has this precious prescription been handed down. (This is the first published case of a quack employing such a fabricated pedigree, though it was later to become the stock in trade of impostors.) Mastro Paolo reports all the successes achieved by his family and denounces the remedies of his competitors as, of course, utterly worthless. He unfolds captured banners. Then, while the public stares, he reaches into his boxes and draws out, one after another, a succession of snakes, with alarming recitals of their capture in savage forests. And now the mountebank surpasses himself, pushing out of the recesses of his trunks some giant lizards and Egyptian crocodiles. The populace is covered with goose flesh; it shudders collectively. Undoubtedly not a soul present would dare to set foot again outside the city gate without first taking a powder of St. Paul. In this case, the peril to be averted by the remedy could be displayed in lively colors: diversion and advertising blended together in a single act, and the crowd was both repelled and attracted at the same moment, as it was by the popular broadsheets of the age which showed woodcuts of fabled monsters, wild animals, or freaks of nature from distant corners of the earth. This was the first form in which pictorial news was presented to satisfy the human appetite for novelty and sensation. But at this crucial point in Mastro Paolo's show, just as the real "act" goes on and the descendant of St. Paul urges his snakes to dance, an unforeseen distraction occurs. A competitor announces himself, a charlatan from neighboring Parma, who has brought with him a little trained goat, which walks on two legs, skips over chairs, and even dances. In another corner of the square a third quack, hailing from Milan,



a fashionably dressed dandy, is endeavoring to turn attention to himself by imitating all kinds of animals and men.

In the introduction to this chapter, Garzoni reports that the numbers of quacks in the squares and market places were ever increasing in his day, and that the people would rather listen to them chatter than attend to preachers of the Word of God or to scholars in academic chairs. And in fact the charlatan did become more general in the seventeenth century. Troops of quack-salvers penetrated the remote corners of European countries selling rejuvenation waters, soaps, and secret formulas, smelling salts, rosaries, and holy pictures as well as some not so holy. They were organized like other trades and professions and the medical mountebanks in particular carried on an eternal warfare with the authorities and the medical faculties over licenses. Now and then the state endeavored to put down these practitioners; official prohibitions of quackery are preserved in almost every country, written in every language. Those of the Republic of Venice are noteworthy because the majority of all Italian charlatans were Venetians and so the Senate in that city was peculiarly involved in the struggle against their power. The earliest of the Venetian decrees, dating from the year 1638, refers to all the instructions previously issued, to which no heed had been paid, and goes on to complain that peddlers of elixirs, powders, and oils were operating without a license or permit from the college of physicians, and that they were active everywhere, in the city of Venice, on the mainland and country estates; their especial victims were the "country people and the poor, who do not know much about such things and therefore suffer considerable damage to their health." In the eighteenth century a decree of 1760 threatened those who sold secret remedies, openly or in private, with fines, imprisonment, and the loss of their wares which were to be publicly burned. In 1768 another proclamation admitted that the forbidden goods were still being hawked, above all on the mainland, where the rural proletariat lived, and that abominable deceptions were used to lure coins from the most simple-minded folk—"dalle genti più idiote"—to the grave prejudice of their health.

With the nervous zeal of a fighter who knows himself defeated beforehand, Paolo Zacchia, founder of the study of legal medi-



cine, turned to condemn the market mountebanks in his book, *Liber Quaestionum Medico Legalium*, published in 1621. He demanded punishment by death for any doctor or quack who sold medicaments without first having ascertained the nature and causes of the disease, or having laid eyes on the invalid. Touchingly he complains that it will not be long before every man, woman, and especially old women, will be claiming to possess secret cures for all ailments. Zacchia insists that the authorities should go to the bottom of these matters, ascertain the successes or failures of proposed remedies and record whether the promises were fulfilled or the patients died; in cases of obvious fraud, the guilty parties should be brought to account. But precisely this statistical examination was what the followers of the charlatan, not to mention the rogue himself, shrank from hearing about.

Zacchia knew that in his heart. Despair breathes from his lines. He deplored the fact that certain colleges of physicians and even princes were glad to distribute licenses to pseudo doctors; he persisted in urging the reëxamination and withdrawal of such fraudulent permits. After making all the proposals he could, however, out of his factual knowledge and as a responsible scientist, Zacchia seemed to lay his hands impotently on his lap and cry out helplessly: "But who could succeed in damming up their flood of bold speech in the market place, where they proclaim their remedies capable of driving out all diseases; they would have the impudence, if they deemed it profitable, to declare upon oath that their panaceas would raise the dead. Even so, they not only delude the superstitious people with this certain, inborn, and wordy eloquence of theirs ["*quella certa lor naturale verbosa eloquenza*"] but practically force their cure-alls upon the folk." Mere knowledge must capitulate before these interminable, swollen discourses, the "eloquenza" to which Zacchia, like so many other authors of definitions in lexicons, ascribes the conquering power of humbugs; the most dangerous and specifically charlatanic tool of deception is the spoken and written word. Stirred to the depths in his convictions, not only as a researcher but as a devout Christian, Paolo Zacchia reminded his readers that St. Thomas Aquinas reckoned it a sin merely to stop and listen to charlatans.

The people flocked around these false prophets, however, be-



cause they, too, had been disturbed in their religious convictions; the religious wars in the seventeenth century, following the upheaval of the Reformation, had profoundly shaken the spiritual security of Europe. Scourged by plague as well as war, often driven from hearth and home, the people could not longer pursue old patterns of life; the breakdown of established habits brought a new lability in both ideas and emotions. It was a century of travail in which Hobbes, formulating his theory of the state, declared: "The people is born, only to die at birth." Out of these painful experiences came an unbounded longing for transmutation, a readiness to accept any promise of relief through change.

In times of need, when men must bear heavy burdens of suffering not caused by obvious faults of their own and therefore incomprehensible to them, they tend to herd together around any leader who promises crumbs of comfort. By their religious upbringing they had been prepared to expect an ultimate delivery from affliction, for Christianity is a millennial faith; but they could no longer look to the church herself for consolation as exclusively as formerly. That benevolent function as distributor of hope as well as alms was no longer so well exercised by the church; her energies were too deeply absorbed by the struggle against the growing power of the state. Absolutist princes were striving to divest the priests of political influence and to bring questions of religion and religious instruction under secular authority; the King tried to take over the old function of consolation as well, and make himself supreme mediator between God and the people. So gravely threatened, the church turned a face of severity rather than compassion toward the faithful; through the rigors of the Inquisition and the reaffirmation of dogma she was endeavoring to close the rifts that had been opened among Christians by the philosophers of the age. And yet these abysses, widened by strife and misery, gaped more widely than ever.

In this time of despair, of empirical pessimism, the church was unable to conjure up radiant visions; instead, she sternly reminded men of the brevity of life and the terrors of the hereafter. Faith did not vanish, of course; it continued to exist side by side with knowledge, its infinity contrasting with the finality of the other. But faith was now colored by the dismal emphasis upon hell by preachers of all sects. Both heaven and hell had become



weapons in the hands of the temporal governors of the world, also, and threatening images were employed as *instrumenti regnandi*, as tools for compelling obedience from subjects. But faith, so menaced and distorted, degenerated into all sorts of fantastic conceptions, until little remained to separate it from superstition. When the people could no longer find the same haven of peace in the church as before, they were in danger of listening to the charlatan's promises; they hung more eagerly than before upon his pictures of an illusory world of dreams; he offered a hope at least of improving the common lot, of gaining a windfall of luck and happiness.

While the masses of Europe were thus sinking more deeply into superstition, there were minds, however, that were striving to introduce a greater rationality into human affairs. "There is nothing wonderful in all that," was a favorite sentence of Hobbes—though the common people found everything wonderful or fearful. Hobbes viewed the human soul as a mechanism comparable to a clock; but this mechanism had been managed so badly that he and the chief intellects of the century had to look on helplessly, watching the increasing degradation of the masses. There could be little contact between such thinkers and the people. The former were constantly advancing scientific and philosophical speculation; mathematics was the reigning science and prescient knowledge was given the highest place in the scheme of values but the intellectual achievements of the age could not be shared widely; they were still confined largely to the studies of the learned and small cultivated audiences about the courts. The gulf between the simple folk and the governors and thinkers, always wide, had become vaster than ever before. The masses were less and less able to grasp the increasingly complex ideas of the educated; in return, the educated excluded the masses from their range of thought: in absolutist France, dramatists no longer showed crowd scenes. Nevertheless, a haunting fear of the immense and unknown crowd had been awakened in those high circles by the middle of the seventeenth century—an obsession never felt so strongly before by the world's rulers. The dark inchoate masses, it seemed, threatened the intellectual edifices of this proud "century of system," by the wild abortions of its overwrought fantasy. And fantasy became suspect.

Where the Renaissance had delighted in the world of fantasy,

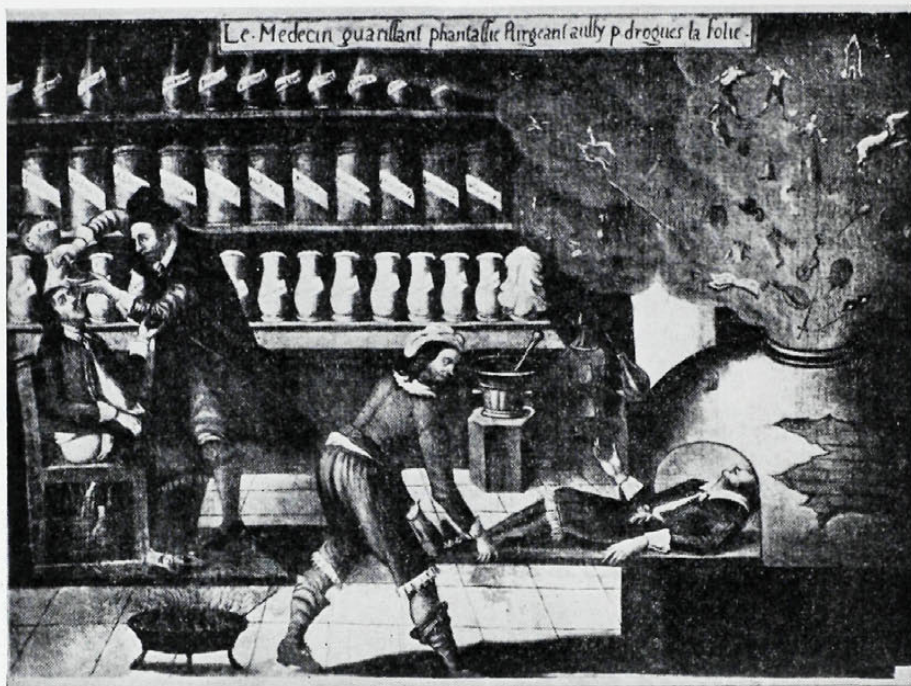


gladly peering into the harmless realms of Titania and Puck, the later seventeenth century rejected the fantastic, giving the word that tinge of scorn it still bears. Ben Jonson once decried the popularity of such Shakespearean "drolleries" as those in *The Tempest*, and reproved audiences equally for their "concupiscence of jigs and dances"—placing their delight in Ariel on the same level with their pleasure in a well-executed reel. That became a general attitude in succeeding generations, when the brand of sin that marked most amusements was extended to fancy as well. Men still took refuge from earthly suffering and the threat of hell in idle dreams, it is true, but with a bad conscience. Fancy now lurked in covert hiding places, no longer roaming the broad empire accorded to it in spacious Elizabethan times.

How far this derogation of the fancy had gone, until it was confused with simple madness, is illustrated by the painted sign-board of the apothecary Cosseret at Autun (Fig. 18). The inscription reads: "The doctor heals fancy and purges madness by drugs." In a room that is half pharmacy and half alchemist's laboratory, a physician is shown in the act of pouring purgatives through a funnel into a patient, a procedure intended to cure his madness. In the foreground, an assistant is busy with another patient, afflicted with fancies, who is being shoved head foremost into the alchemist's oven. Evidently alchemy had lost none of its fascination in this century of natural science with all its pride in cold "cognition." In the steam above the oven float various figures supposed to be those that had animated the imaginary world of the patient. Not all these images from which he is to be purified are recognizable. One may note a white horse and woman, however, an opened book and a guitar—symbols, it would seem, of a moderate joy. But owing to the innate abhorrence of this severe century for every form of optimistic impulse, the very concept of happiness had to creep into the veils of a dream. This secret longing for the happiness that remained so desirable, in spite of all reprimands, was met by the charlatans with their adroit dramaturgy. Whatever surrounded the mountebanks, or emanated from them, was a colorful contrast to the grimness and burdens of everyday life; the stern hand of authority, religious and secular, seemed lifted during those fleeting, joyful moments spent at fair or market, in the "concupiscence of jigs and dances."



Many of the performances at the fairs are to be understood as a commercialized release from the somberness of daily life. Often a mere hint in costume or gesture suffices to transport the audience far away from its accustomed mood of heavy sobriety. Such a scene appears in an engraving made after a painting of the



18. Sign painting of the apothecary Cosseret in Autun, seventeenth century. In the steam appear images of happiness, from which the patient is to be cured. The stern seventeenth century proscribed such wish dreams, but they assumed shapes all the more fantastic.

Dutchman Girardow (Gerard Dou), called "The Quacksalver" (Fig. 19). Here a charlatan is standing quite alone, dispensing with the usual troupe of assistants and relying only upon his own personal grace. His dancer's lightness seems to mock the gravity of the commonplace world; it is as though he floated above his hearers, opening for them magic casements into happiness, through which the images of fancy could flutter. He is dressed as a harlequin, but it is his gesture quite as much as his dress that gives him the fascination of a stranger from an en-



chanted world, with the power to lead others into it. His slender figure is lifted on high, silhouetted against the tall and narrow mansion in the rear; from this elevation he bends down, accom-



19. *Le marchand d'opiat.*

*Engraved by A. le Grand, after the painting, "The Quack-salver," of Girardow (Gerard Dou), 1652.*

panying the bow with an easy turn of the head. This condescension and the whole sinuosity of his person set him apart from the massive breadth of the earthbound group before him. An intensity emanates from this man, a force of attraction that is in no way diminished by the levity of his manner; one might almost

imagine him flying, so much do his appearance and movement suggest the abrogation of all laws and make the impossible appear possible. In the midst of his auditors stands a young girl; only her small head is visible, wrapped in a white hood, but it is swayed in a pose as light and dancerlike as his own, suggesting



20. *The charlatan.*

*Etching by von Louthembourg. Beginning of the eighteenth century.*

a trance of joy. Is the stranger offering tooth paste for sale? Of course, anyone would buy tooth paste from him, or whatever wares he chose to extol, for with the goods he handsomely includes a little key to happiness.

Another artist in deceptive gesture is to be found in the etching of Von Louthembourg (Fig. 20). What this somewhat bestial figure has to offer is far from clear; he is exhibiting a coin, though the important thing is not the object but his bow, a nimble and ingratiating pose that is repeated by the little ape



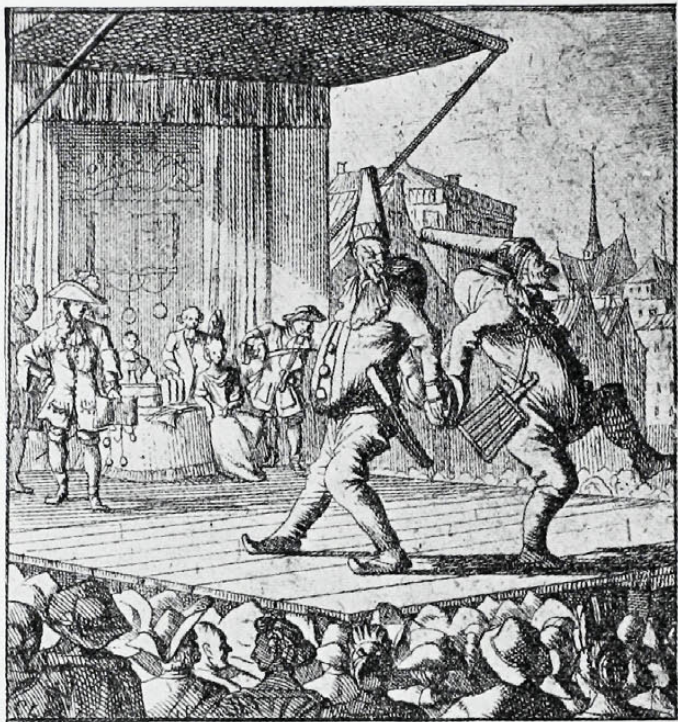
seated at his feet. With a peculiarly arresting motion of the fingers he seems to be holding and lifting his audience by invisible threads. The magic spell woven by the charlatan here has something of the same light charm that, in the other picture, has so ensnared the little Dutch girl. This effect is the more unreal and surprising because the man who executes the captivating gesture is no lithe harlequin but a thick-set fellow with a sword, a coarse carnival mask. Large and heavy as his hands may be, they are capable of lending a subtle significance and attraction to every object they hold; they can evoke the mood of happiness in the lookers-on. Happiness—the shallow and worldly joy they have been taught to shun by their religious mentors—seems to float, nameless and unrecognized, over the spectators at such performances. However evanescent this mood, it yields a harvest of clinking coins to fill the particolored caps and hoods of the collection takers.

The more numerous quacks became in the seventeenth century, the sharper grew their rivalry and the more striking the means to which they resorted. Since the tinctures and panaceas they sold were so much alike, their competitive strife had to turn from the wares to perfecting the methods of advertisement. They learned to supply the superficial entertainment that often satisfies the human need for happiness, and at the right psychological moment they whipped out their bottles and jars with an appeal to buy. Continually wandering from place to place, they could reënact the same stale show to an ever-varying public. That such healers, gold makers and toothdrawers should have formed a close alliance with the theater was inevitable.

To understand the nature of this attachment, one must forget modern preconceptions of the gulf between theater and life: to the man of the Middle Ages and of later times, confined to a narrow sphere of action, the life story of the traveling quack, full of exciting incidents in remote lands, was theater enough. No better entertainment was needed than a long recital of such experiences. In the thirteenth-century monologue of the Parisian poet Ruteboeuf, or in the inspired "*Jeu de la Feuillée*" of the hunchback of Arras, Adam de la Halle, quacks are introduced with their personal tales. And as the real theater developed in the Middle Ages, it made use of these popular characters. A brief scene introducing a medicine man was interposed in the



third Erlau Passion Play, by way of relief to its length and monotony—the first-known *divertissement*. The three Marys are seen wending their way toward the Holy Sepulcher; they are intercepted by a serving man, Rubin, ancestor of Hanswurst, Jean Potage, Jack Pudding, and all the clowns, who has come to announce a seller of ointments. The public went wild with joy



21. *The doctor. The quack has retreated to the background, while the clowns attract and hold the public.*

*By Caspar Luyken, about 1700.*

over this bit of fooling and, from the fifteenth century onward such byplay, much elaborated, became a stock requisite of carnival drama. But if the theater copied life so successfully, why should not life in turn study the methods that had proved so effective in the theater? The dramatic value of such scenes, in which the quack was heralded by the clown, was recognized; the real quack then hired the actor to precede him and raise public anticipation. Instead of jumping on a bench and endeavoring to introduce himself as of old, the ambitious quack now employed



announcers who went ahead with descriptions of his skill, proofs of his extraordinary abilities, and other kinds of advertisement. Not only did he make use of theatrical figures in this way, but when he finally arrived at a new city, he allowed another dramatic personage, the buffoon or zany, to spring upon the platform, which now took the place of the former simple bench. The exhibitions of the quack became so elaborate in time that there was little to differentiate them from those of the real stage, save that the end was not mere satisfaction of curiosity or the stimulation of emotions but the sale of drugs.

In the many engravings that attest this growing association of the charlatan with the theater we often find the quack almost eclipsed by the clown; leaving the front of the stage to the show, he may retire to the rear, leaving his tent and table of medicines only dimly visible. At such performances, the speculation was not directed so much to raising consumer desire through the puffing of wares as to creating an atmosphere which would weaken the judgment and will power of the public. Not until the audience was hypnotized would the leader of the troupe step forward with directions for making gold or using his beautifying lotions, or to give medical treatment in the tent if not upon the stage itself. Since this crowning scene often drew as many onlookers as the preceding entertainment, it was natural for the wonder worker himself to appear frequently in striking costumes. A lively portrayal of the curious medley of buffoonery and surgery, so typical of the eighteenth century, is given by the great Austrian painter of the baroque period, Franz Anton Maulpertsch, upon one of the few sheets that comprise his entire graphic work (Fig. 22). It is hardly to be wondered at if this exciting hodgepodge not only captured the common folk "through the paths of sight and hearing," as a contemporary complained, but also robbed them of the power to see and hear aright.

Supported on two tubs, a wooden platform and a tent have been set up carelessly and in haste. Almost the whole width of the platform is taken up by the three principal figures, the dancing harlequin, the woman who is selling drugs, and the charlatan himself. The costliness of the latter's attire would indicate his belonging to a higher social class, were this not belied by its disorderliness. Behind the charlatan's back lurks an accomplice,



also in costume and of none too trustworthy an appearance, who holds aloft two entwined snakes, presumably about to be shown to the public. Among the three, charlatan, accomplice, and harlequin, something is brewing. Perhaps it is a little sleight-of-hand trick, a deft bit of roguery—its nature is not manifest. In any case, the charlatan's sidelong glance seems to seek mutual understanding from his accomplice, while the harlequin is about



22. *The strolling charlatan. The variety of offerings on the stage serves to confuse the spectators and divert them from the painful act of tooth drawing.*

*Etching by Franz Anton Maulpertsch, 1785.*

to slip something into his hand, even while he sustains the rhythm of the dance. Pushed into a corner, as an entirely subsidiary business, the tooth pulling is going on. A tooth-extractor in a feather-decked hat seems to be an employee like the harlequin, and is conducting but one of the many attractive exhibitions by drawing out a tooth from a man doubled up in agony. The small boy in the right foreground has already been treated and has



therefore left the stage. He is still suffering acute pains, it is true, but his "act" is over and no one has any use for him now. Only a small dog, a street cur, offers him the comforting presence of a living creature; more compassionate than the human beings who are still enthralled by their curiosity, the dog lifts a paw to the boy's knee. In the rear may be seen a clown climbing a ladder with the aid of other actors; and all this activity, this promiscuous mixture of movements and noises, has something breath-taking about it. Designedly so, of course; whoever struggles to catch his breath is more apt to buy without consideration.

The faces of these bystanders wear a peculiar expression, quite unlike that enchanted smile hovering on the lips of the young Dutch maiden in the previous picture, suggesting instead a mixture of repulsion and attraction, fear and curiosity. In almost all the paintings and engravings of such scenes a steaming fog seems to emanate from audiences bathed in an agreeable sweat of anxiety. Theater? Certainly, but not so purposeless as the true stage, and that is why the redeeming and releasing laughter of genuine comedy is absent. Though they do not notice him, there is a calm and solitary man sitting at one side of the platform by a table which serves both as cashier's desk and drug dispensary. Unmoved in the very midst of all this hubbub and gesticulation, he keeps his fingers crooked over the parchments and the coins in the little box. In those hands all the threads are held; for this box the harlequin is stamping his jig and the sinister fellow in the slouched hat is holding his snakes in readiness—but the people must never be permitted a moment's pause, lest they perceive it.

Only on the soil of France did this combination of medicine show and theater produce a really strong and original personality: Jean Salomon Tabarin. Not a charlatan himself, but a jester who accompanied a medical quack, the drugseller Mondor, he executed his improvisations with such fire and temperament that the name of Tabarin alone was remembered, while that of Mondor was soon forgotten. The word, surviving in the titles of European music halls, as in the Parisian "*Bal Tabarin*," has become a synonym for meretricious theatricality. What Tabarin offered the public was the typical bait designed by charlatans to catch popular fancy: the story of Mondor's fabulous lineage, explaining the extraordinary powers of that healer as products



of his divine race and heritage and not as the result of any knowledge, skill, or capacity on his part. This commonplace stuff, heard from barkers at every country fair, had never been developed before with such genius. The renown of any humbug, whether among his contemporaries or posterity, has never depended upon *what* he had to sell but solely upon his manner of selling it. Mondor only brewed the potions and compounded the pills, an insignificant part of a medicine show, while Tabarin took care of the more important ingredients, the fables and jests, and received all the fame.

When and where Tabarin was born cannot be learned now from his biographers. Indeed his contemporaries were no more certain. Tabarin took elaborate precautions to veil his origins in secrecy, a trick that caught the public instantly and made one man whisper to his neighbor: "Where does he really come from? It would be interesting to know." Of course the compilers of dictionaries were not satisfied with such vagueness; Larousse accordingly gives us to understand that the jester was born in Paris in 1584, a statement contradicted by other authorities. Tabarin himself, in his *Conversations*, betrayed no inclination to confine himself to such definite facts; often he announced that he came from Naples, and this led some philologists to trace Tabarin from Tabarini; but just as often the clown insisted that France was his true home, a remark that seems justified by the wholly French charm of his personality. At other times, away from the stage and apparently in moments of bibulous inspiration, he would reveal "the truth" about his pedigree: his ancestor was the god Saturn. When fleeing from Jupiter in the land of Latium, Saturn had begot a son, Tabarum, and this name had been handed down among his descendants. Whoever did not believe this could go look it up in Strabo and Pausanias—it is improbable that the gaping clerks and students to whom he related the story rushed off at once to engage in this research. Undoubtedly these were masterpieces of mendacity turned out by the great extempore artist, improvising his own past as he went along. He produced, however, a tangible proof of his remarkable pedigree in the shape of an old gray felt hat; every evening the comedian would flatten and fold this battered object, remodeling it as surprisingly as his lineage. This hat, so he solemnly declared, was a piously preserved souvenir of his an-



cestor's flight—Saturn had concealed himself from the wrath of Jupiter by hiding under its brim.

The inventions of Tabarin soon formed so large a part of the show that Mondor was reduced to hawking his pills for a few moments before and after the monologues. People only bought his drugs by way of paying an entrance fee to hear Tabarin. In Paris the performances were staged in the Place Dauphine, on the île de la Cité, a square enclosed with buildings on three sides and overshadowed by trees that even today gives one the impression of entering a bewitching little theater. Against the background formed by a large tapestry assembled the troupe of five persons: a violinist, a musician with one of the old six-stringed violas, and a page who distributed the flasks and pots of drugs to the laughing audience when it was ready to loosen its purse strings. The fourth person was Mondor, whose sole remaining function was to pull out his medicines from a long chest, such as all quacks carried with them, and extol their curative powers during intermissions. The main burden of the show was carried by Tabarin himself (Fig. 23), who appeared wearing the fantastic hat of Saturn and usually a blouse, broad breeches, and cloak of white linen. Over his shoulder he threw an odd length of material and completed his disguise with a wooden sword, a beard like Neptune's and long silver hair that framed a face painted deathly pale. He immediately attacked Mondor, with such virulence that one would not have supposed him capable of defending "Le Maître," as he once did in real life, against the aspersions of a professional *doctor medicinae*, M. de Courval. Here, as on every primitive improvised stage, it was a witty dialogue, a rapid play of question and answer, that delighted the audience; but it was not all make-believe, for the two temperaments of Mondor and Tabarin formed a genuine contrast. Mondor carried himself with pedantic stiffness, giving himself "a peculiar air of gravity," and adorning his person with tinsel. His speech was a "learned" jargon of his own invention and his delivery was full of the labored pathos of the pundit; such behavior appeared laughable to the French populace and became the butt of Tabarin's sparkling improvisations. The latter's repartee was coarse but studded with witty puns and grotesque assertions, perpetually surprising the audience with some piquant and original drollery. He must have been a truly great comedian;



not even when he uttered the most ribald jests, so it is reported, did any smile disturb the unbroken gravity of his countenance. But this only increased the roars of his public servants, mes-



23. The buffoon, J. S. Tabarin (1584–1633), extols the nostrums of the quack Mondor.

*Frontispiece from Les oeuvres de Tabarin, etc., Paris, 1622.*

sengers, scholars, and shop assistants; they shook with laughter from the left toe to the right ear, “depuis le talon gauche jusqu’à l’oreille droite.” On Fridays there were extra shows, at which all pretense of selling drugs was dropped and Mondor appeared in



woman's petticoats, with two faces, one that of an affected creature named Francisquine and the other that of a street wench called Isabelle. With inimitable airs, Mondor played Francisquine until Tabarin struck him with a stick, and then, in a twinkling, he changed to the obdurate Isabelle, weary of love and insensible to all Tabarin's advances. Tabarin took the part of the pining lover and sought to soften the hard heart of Isabelle, who made the same return to all his entreaties and caressing names:

Je ne veux point aymer,  
ni ne veux que l'on m'ayme.  
car l'amour ne fait rien  
que troubler le cerveau.

(I will not love, and will not have anyone love me, for love does nothing but trouble the brain.)

That was the most loudly applauded program number of the conjuror. The theater brought such large rewards that in 1630 Tabarin could retire as a "landed nobleman" upon his estates near Paris, leaving Mondor to continue his drug business with the help of another buffoon. Supposedly, Tabarin was shot in 1634 by an envious neighbor while hunting. But it is as difficult to make sure of his end as of his origins because, during his lifetime, Tabarin made every effort to circulate anecdotes, true or false, involving his own person—another touch of the charlatan. He did not have to invent everything himself, however; various writers composed leaflets purporting to reveal picturesque episodes in his career and had the stories hawked about the streets of Paris. They reaped harvests from the sale. Tabarin's own works were also in great demand, especially among ladies of high degree. Since the customs of the times forbade them to join the crowds that jostled in the public square every evening, relishing the gross phrases and spiced repartee of the comedian, they made up for the loss by reading his monologues.

Perhaps Tabarin might have been repudiated by his divine ancestor, Saturn, but never by France. He was a specifically French type, able to transform with graceful artistry all that he saw and experienced; shrewd as a man must be to make his

way in the world, he was not immoderately unscrupulous. And one quality that seems lacking in most of the star charlatans of Germany and Italy was possessed to a superb degree by Tabarin: self-irony, the gift of smiling at himself.



## Molders of Public Opinion by the Printed and Spoken Word

I THANK my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all:

Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue.

*I Corinthians XIV, 18-19.*

O BROTHERS, to think of the Speech without meaning (which is mostly ours), and of the Speech with contrary meaning (which is wholly ours), manufactured by the organs of Mankind in one solar day. . . .

*From Cagliostro's speech to his fellow scoundrels  
in The Diamond Necklace of Thomas Carlyle.*

The "stage quacks," as they were sometimes called, were forced by the exigencies of their profession to lead a vagrant life. On the very first day of their arrival in a new place, as soon as their tents were pitched, indeed, they wanted to begin making money. To be sure, they and their zanies were skilled improvisers, but the way had to be prepared even for improvisation. The more distinguished the quack, the more pretentious the apparatus he employed. His approach might be heralded by the fanfares of mounted trumpeters, while a hired "Merry Andrew" praised his master in humorous vein, until at last the preparations were crowned by the triumphal entry of the wonder worker himself, with tinsel pomp. This impressive parade into the town, an advertisement in the form of a living tableau, became a permanent feature of the propaganda program.

There were, however, charlatans of a more elevated species who showed greater subtlety in their methods. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced many men who were not professional quacks in the narrow sense, but who engaged in the various forms of swindling and imposture incidental to a many-sided career. These were the "higher" charlatans, as De la Fontaine designated them. Nothing was more vital to such persons than to hide or erase any trait that could link them with the

mountebanks of the commoner kind. They had continually to exert themselves to avoid the invidious term "charlatan." But they were under the same necessity of announcing their approach and advertising their marvelous powers as any ordinary roving medicine man. If they had not adopted a wandering life from choice, they were condemned by bitter necessity and as a punishment for their frauds to move continually from place to place. Because they were always being discovered in the act of deception, and driven out, they had to live like the "strolling" players of the yearly fairs, the very men with whom they denied kinship.

In one of his word derivations, dubious as they often are, Mencken stressed the lack of any settled home as a leading characteristic of the charlatan: "Latinus utique Circulatorium dicere poteram, cum vox illa ex Hetrusco ciarlare, quod est circulare seu decipere, descendat, unde Ciarlatano seu Cerretano circulator, et Gallicum Charlatan, quod veteres Ciarlatan scripsere . . ." (As a Latinist I might have said circulation, since this designation comes from the Etruscan "ciarlare," that is, to roam about or deceive, from which also come ciarlatanus or cerretanus, the market crier or stroller, as well as the French charlatan, which used to be written ciarlatan.) Again and again Mencken refers to the eternal wandering, "continuo peregrinantur," as typical of such existences. But neither a Borri, a Taylor, nor a Count de Saint-Germain moved from one land to another because he enjoyed such a mode of life; it was because he had to flee. Charlatans were seeking refuge not the delights of travel; where the men of the Renaissance were animated by a thirst to see and explore the world, these late-comers were harried by strict necessity into their ceaseless flight around the world. They knew very well that their retreat must be swift and far, for in these more modern times news could follow them over boundaries and even across oceans. News service was still far from perfect, however, and a swindler, unmasked at one place, could often be welcomed in another country, or even a neighboring town, with untroubled rejoicing, and could continue treatments that had already been revealed as worthless elsewhere.

Good reports, sent with all speed ahead, could help them more than bad news, hastening after them, could harm their reputations, they knew well. The customs of the "ordinary and every-



day" mountebanks, who sent out costumed heralds and hired clowns with handbills, were indeed too obvious for the loftier impostors. The latter relied instead upon private conversations, the spread of apt anecdotes, descriptions of the magnificent clothing and costly possessions of the wonder worker, praise of his good heart and benevolent disposition, all designed to prepare a favorable atmosphere for his reception. Social connections and letters of recommendation from personages of high degree, self-composed notices in newspapers, friends and supporters sent ahead as advance agents, performed the same services as the heralds and harlequins of the strolling quacks. Propaganda, as much as the "*continuo peregrinantur*," was a link between the star charlatan and his fellow of the market place. And since all such swindlers, high and low, were masters in the arts of influencing and guiding popular opinion, they knew that their greatest triumphs and indeed the only secure form of success could be based only on one formula: to compel the people to accept two mutually exclusive propositions at one and the same time. Truth is easily dethroned when men no longer feel the force of contradictions. Thus it is possible to convince a band of devotees of the two theses, simultaneously: that mankind is subject to eternal need and disease, and is powerless in face of these afflictions; *and* that mankind can shake off need and disease, and is therefore strong and mighty. Such followers will not blink when they hear that many patients whom their wonder worker treated in Paris have just died. He will still be a man of miracles in London so long as he observes the cardinal principles of mass persuasion.

The higher grade of impostor may adopt many tricks from the "stage quack," including his method of diverting the attention of the public from his true aims by supplying humor and sensation, clowning and tightrope walking. But he must confuse as well as divert the popular mind. For this it is imperative to exhibit much pomp—hence the appearance of the star charlatans upon richly harnessed steeds or in elegant, night-black coaches. However, this splendid state must appear absolutely independent of ordinary sources of income; the charlatan denied that he took money for his services. He rejected honorariums, preferring, he said, to serve mankind as a selfless benefactor. Usually, he gave out that he possessed private means. Such state-



ments could be read on the handbills, together with announcements of the remarkable operations and cures, or alchemistic results of the miracle worker, to which the greatest dignitaries in the world gladly attested. All this procedure was essentially even closer to the theater than the clowning of the common quack: it approached high comedy. Like a great actor, the star charlatan understands how to impose himself upon the masses. But he goes further than the actor: he understands the finer trick of letting the masses create their own delusions. When he pretends to discover a new elixir, for example, he does not turn to the professional physician for an opinion, but calls upon the public to be his judge; in so doing, he confers upon the flattered through a medical authority it does not possess. He arouses its self-assertiveness and twists this vanity to his own profit.

This method was more easily employed in cities than in the country. The primitive spectacles of the strolling players found readiest applause among yokels; the star charlatan looked for his victims among townsmen, who indeed demanded more refinement and novelty in their amusements, but were also easier to mislead by appeals to their judgment and knowledge. This was especially the case in the second half of the seventeenth century, at a time when art and science had begun to appear the special privilege and mark of the highest social classes. Whoever said, "I do not know anything about it," thereby put himself on a lower plane of society. As the natural sciences and the pseudo sciences associated with them were then the center of interest, it was particularly needful to converse about these matters with a semblance of ease. When the scientist remarked that there were certain questions and problems upon which nobody could deliver an opinion without expert knowledge of the facts, he merely aroused hatred and resentment. "*Veritas odium parit*" (the truth begets hate) is the citation with which Mencken commenced his discourses on charlatanry. The popularity of the alchemists was in no small measure due to their assertion that expert knowledge is superfluous, that a single small key would suffice to open all wisdom, and that the philosophers' stone would serve medicine, chemistry, mineralogy, or astrology with equal facility. The charlatans likewise kept insisting that everyone could understand everything, if only it were put to him in the



right words. They delivered long pompous speeches encouraging their followers to step forward and take that share in the achievements of scientific research to which their rights and abilities entitled them: they were the equals of anyone. They discussed things which few men could comprehend in their entirety, in a manner readily understood by all, and, in popularizing the facts of science, they distorted and falsified them, misleading the public mind.

"The man of opinion," said St. Thomas Aquinas, "is by no means free from inner contradiction. He is still afraid he might be wrong. He fears the *other* may be right, and insists all the more on being right himself." While these words have a timeless validity, they are especially applicable to periods when too much knowledge has been heaped up through discoveries, the rapid development of the sciences, or quickened progress in technology. Minds are then overburdened with the effort to keep up with these accumulations of facts. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this basis of fact, the content of science, was still so obscure and shifting that the great mass of the public regarded it with distrust, not able indeed to dispute in such matters but not yet convinced of the genuineness of these discoveries. But if one could not form any opinion at all on the subject, one was threatened by the painful feeling of social ostracism. The attitude of the middle classes in the cities toward science was one of mingled doubt and envy. This was a state extremely favorable to the charlatan; through his mysterious and appealing lectures, they were guided away from the cold sobriety of genuine knowledge into the picturesque realms of pseudo science; their feeling of doubt and discouragement gave way to a vague, baseless confidence, the mood in which the human mind becomes most easily a prey to the impostor. These fake scientific talks were indeed excitingly mystical; yet to all appearances they could be understood by the common man. They erected a foothold of security upon which the average citizen might climb, but there was no real foundation beneath it; this was in fact the secret of its extraordinary appeal. And as the simple remark, "I do not understand that," had fallen into such disfavor that the plain man blushed in embarrassment over such an admission, so modesty itself went out of fashion. Where cocksureness be-



came the only socially approved attitude, as happened in the eighteenth century, it was natural that the insolent bluster and prolixity of the charlatan should be more and more admired.

The anonymous editor who issued his emendations to Mencken in 1791 censured the vanity of savants and literati and the supercilious airs they gave themselves. As examples of genuine dignity and the modesty associated with it, he brought forth Lessing, Wieland, Haller, Weisse, Kleist, and Mendelssohn, asking whether anyone could find a trace of self-praise in them, whether they "gave judgment on their own works or, detailing its beauties, trumpeted their own importance and indispensability. All this they left to others, content to appear with their works and let these speak for them. They shone in the splendor of their worth, but it was their own light and not an artificial gleam of fireworks. They awaited admirers, but calmly and without trying to collect them. That is all changed now. Verbosity and self-laudation have taken the place of that modesty—men despise a virtue from which they expect to reap only lean and belated rewards." In these lines the whole behavior of the charlatan is characterized, and that world of the eighteenth century as well, when fireworks were considered the most delicious amusement. The charlatan's power is based upon turning to account every form of insecurity, religious, spiritual, historical, or economic; he has to guide and warp opinion until he can set up his own scheme of values, in which his own shortcomings naturally appear as positive virtues. With a sure touch he succeeded in making modesty and composure and the other qualities which the anonymous author so praised in Lessing or Mendelssohn appear completely outmoded; he stamped them as traits suitable only for odd recluses, while his own qualities and those of his followers were correspondingly raised in market value.

The charlatan's splendor comes, not from inward light, but from the carefully prepared illumination of artificial fireworks. He relied heavily upon the distribution of handbills, or "quack bills" as they used to be called in England, developed out of the old broadsides of the seventeenth century, which had satisfied the news hunger of a people made restless by various kinds of upheavals and disasters. Those early fly sheets were the forerunners of the periodical press. They furnished news, largely in the form of pictures, understandable to all at a time when few



could read and write. "Was G'lahrte durch die Schrift verstahn, das lehrt das G'mähl dem g'meinen Mann" (what scholars learn through the written word, pictures teach the common man) is the inscription under one woodcut vignette of a pamphlet issued during the Thirty Years' War. The "G'mähl," the picture, was plain enough to all, and perhaps someone who knew the alphabet could read aloud the text to those less fortunate. Monsters of the deep, freaks and catastrophes of nature were favorite subjects of these primitive "tabloids." But all printed matter required the permission of authority, and the handbills of the quacks fell under the same head. Bitter contests were consequently waged over such authorizations; if the quacks became too insolent and disregarded official instructions, they were punished by the suppression of their printed advertising.

In the early seventeenth century the quack bills retained the character of simple broadsides; they were pictorial news with a propagandistic turn. If, for example, one closely observes the hippopotamus on the bill of the Paduan medicine man, Dionysio Alberti (Fig. 24), one is involuntarily reminded of the rhinoceros broadside executed by the artist Albrecht Dürer and sold by his wife Agnes together with other masterpieces in the market place of Nürnberg. Dürer, however, showed only the animal, whereas Alberti has linked his creature with a panegyric on the infallible powers of the hippopotamus tooth, which heals all manner of ills. The immense beast is pictured with opened mouth revealing several splendid specimens of the wonder-working teeth; it is placed on the banks of the River Nile, not only to indicate its outlandish origin but also to give Alberti a chance to exhibit another sensation, two large horrid serpents swimming on the surface of the water. All this is vouched for by testimony taken from classical authors and contemporary physicians (the professional scientists were called upon for support, even while the quack was denouncing them as competitors). Finally Alberti declares that he alone possesses this extraordinary tooth, which has the power to cure anything whatever, from a simple stomach-ache to fracture of the skull. His handbill manages to unite all the properties of the pictorial newssheet and the propagandistic report and yet remain within the bounds set by the police authorities.

Sheets which were printed and distributed privately and with-





A simple rhyme, but one that slips easily into the ear and is not soon forgotten. According to tradition, this jingle became so popular that it brought innumerable patients and much wealth to Case. Like all charlatans, he announced on his printed advertisements that he charged nothing for his treatments and also that he was prepared to give legal advice, observing all discretion, from the vantage point of his fifteen years' experience in astrology. So well did he know the effectiveness of numbers, which always play a great role in the propaganda of charlatans, that he pasted on his pillboxes a small ticket with the device:

Here's fourteen pills for thirteen pence;  
enough in any man's own conscience.

Fourteen pills for thirteen pence—that is a master stroke of salesmanship. Making a great ado about the names of his potions also, he called his chief panacea *Mundus Sanitatus* and labeled another the *Wonderful Elixir*, while a third was ingeniously named *Gutta Stiptica Miraculum Mundi*. One of the woodcuts bordering a bill of his shows two Moors busily grinding a powder in a mortar, with sundry surgical instruments strewed around. This is inscribed, "Good News to the Sick." The good news that is to rejoice the ailing of London consists in the announcement that their good old friend Dr. Case lives at such and such a place (with the note: he has been a doctor for thirty-three years), is happy to tender advice gratis for any affliction, and sells his superior medicines at the lowest prices. The whole is closed by another first-rate rhyme:

All ye that are of *Venus Race*  
Apply your selves to *Dr. Case*;  
Who, with a *Box* or two of *PILLS*,  
Will soon remove your painful *ILLS*.

The rhyme "Pills—Ills," emphasized by capital letters, is a little gem, and the entire composition is calculated to inspire the utmost confidence in the discretion of Dr. Case, a matter of prime importance to those of the "*Venus Race*," sufferers from venereal diseases, to whom the verse is addressed. Another of the same expert's productions ventures into a field that was to be fully developed only in much later times; propaganda through personal portraiture. The woodcut (Fig. 25) showing John Case

in person marks a great advance in charlatanic technique over the age of Alberti, who exhibited merely a hippopotamus by the Nile. Crude though it is, this poster manages with consummate skill to suggest the whole "fireworks" of the charlatan: his astrological insight, his intimacy with celestial beings as well as with apparitions of a grislier sort that throw ordinary people into fits but are dutifully obedient to Dr. Case. There he sits in a comfortable armchair, the good old friend of the sick, while the sun and moon—how could they disoblige him?—shower him with



25. Handbill of the quack doctor, John Case of London, an early master of the art of advertisement. In this example, Case appears in his mysterious laboratory.

*End of the seventeenth century.*

their rays. Besides an alchemistic hearth and retorts appears, in his laboratory, a skeleton, dwelling in brotherly intimacy with his old friend Dr. Case. At the moment, that benevolent ally of humanity is receiving the visit of an angel—apparently, to judge by his composure, an old custom of his. Since John Case happens not to be advertising alchemistic secrets today, the inscription draws the moral: "Strive not for gold nor silver butt: with medicines Transmute bodies corrupted into health."

Another illustration of propaganda through portraiture was afforded by a French quack bill, supposedly of the eighteenth century, printed with official approval. It announced the immi-



ment arrival of the *Sieur Ferrand* with ten enumerated beasts, among them a zebra from Manila. To dispel all doubts about the authenticity of his zebra, the *Sieur Ferrand* offered to pay 500 louis d'or to any man who could prove it to be an animal of another species. As the *Sieur Ferrand* proposed to stay only four days in town, it behooved everyone to make the most of the op-



26. Handbill of a "High-German Doctor." The Turkish costume aroused popular interest besides attesting to the exotic wisdom of the wonder worker.

*London, seventeenth century.*

portunity—not, as one might suppose from the foregoing, to see a good menagerie, but to purchase a genuine bearskin which would infallibly stop rheumatic pains. This irrelevant conclusion in the printed advertisement corresponds exactly to the purposely bewildering performances of the "stage quacks" at the market fairs.

At his own cost and risk, a "High-German Doctor" of the seventeenth century printed another bill (Fig. 26) which employs a different sales trick. London was overrun with German quacks at that time, and when one among them attained special renown he was very apt to choose this popular title. The text



runs: "This High-German Doctor, Cured the Emperor of *Turk's* Brother, who was Blind 13 Years." All charlatans are fond of pointing to triumphs in high circles, for that weighs heavily with the crowd: it is far more impressive when a prince regains his eyesight than when a tailor is cured. The predilection for collecting testimonials is another trait that distinguishes the humbug from the modest Lessings and Mendelssohns who let their works speak for them. So our High-German Doctor, not content with exhibiting his own person, like John Case, has displayed his noble patients as well, who testify to his powers; moreover, he appears in action, something always attractive to the public. The Turkish costume of the characters is intended not only to arouse interest in their story but to convey a suggestion of the Doctor's cosmopolitan experience for, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the fancy of mankind was much occupied with dreams of travel in strange lands. Solemnly pledging himself to bring forth witnesses to his statement, the quack declares that he has cured three emperors, nine kings, seven princes, besides others of high degree, and further promises that he cannot only set in artificial teeth of ivory, silver, or gold, but can cause loosened natural teeth to become sound again. Above all, he would make known his skill as an operator on cataracts, which is incomparably greater than that of almost anyone else (the usual intolerant claim to exclusive merit on the part of such swindlers): in less than a quarter of an hour, he can give sight to persons born blind. All the cataract healers promised a rapid cure, some within five minutes; but they insisted that the patients must wear their bandages for several days during convalescence and, usually, before they realized the fraud, the miracle worker had put miles between himself and his despairing victims.

Among the medicaments handed out by the quacks to their deluded patients were the strangest mixtures, potable gold, dissolved emeralds, topazes, and agates, a wide variety of herbs and even human secretions. The composition of these potions was influenced by alchemistic teachings, and in part they were accepted and practiced by the serious physicians of the times; there has always been a certain interchange of ideas and suggestions between genuine science and the daring experimentation of the quacks. The governmental authorities were, however, apparently able to draw distinctions between the announcements



of the honest practitioners and those of the quacks, even though both employed many of the same remedies. They seem to have realized precisely where the danger lay: the essence of charlatanic propaganda was to be found not merely in fulsome praise



27. Registered trade-mark of the "Elixir of Life" of Abraham Kolb.

Augsburg, 1733.

of the articles for sale but in the fact that the figure of the charlatan himself was placed under the spotlight. Therefore the private handbills of the latter were forbidden by the governmental agencies, while permission was graciously granted to such advertisements as that of Abraham Kolb of Augsburg (Fig. 27). The document granting this privilege to Kolb bears

at the top the Bavarian heraldic device with its splendid lion, and goes on to enumerate the various ills to which mankind is subject—the “life balsam” is good to ward off any one of them. His Imperial Majesty himself confers upon Kolb the exclusive right to sell this balsam, and the utmost care is taken to insure its proper use, by giving the correct dosage for sundry ailments. Thus the document avoids sensationalism and strictly preserves the character of a medical prescription. A protective symbol or, as we should call it nowadays, a legally registered trade-mark, was provided for this miraculous water, presumably to be glued on the flasks in which it was sold. The design consisted of a maiden, doubtless representing life itself, standing upon a winged globe of the earth that whirls beneath her feet.

It may be taken for granted that the charlatan's printed matter, authorized or not, made the desired impression upon the great mass of men and women who were predisposed by nature to admire such “fireworks.” An unsuccessful method of persuasion is never long pursued. And yet there were even simple persons, in many countries, who could see through the hocus-pocus and smile at the gullibility of their fellows. A burlesque of these quack bills may be found among the drawings of the Bolognese artist, Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, to whose inspired portrayal of the charlatan's faithful followers reference has been made above (Fig. 5). Since Mitelli was wont to dispose of his work in the market place and on the streets, in person or through dealers, he had of necessity to make certain that his choice of subjects would please his chance customers; all the more significant, therefore, is his mock advertisement recommending “an infallible secret for the prolongation of life” (Fig. 28). The purchaser of this sheet might read: “When Death comes to fetch you, you must at once blow in his face, but look sharp and never stop blowing for an instant or you will immediately die.” Not many of the pictorial chroniclers of that day reached the level of Mitelli, who had the gift of talent as well as the sure instincts of a publicist. What he catches, he records with the same impetuous temperament and underlying tone of merry skepticism that distinguished the people to whom he spoke and belonged: the Italian folk. Charlatans were indeed as numerous in the streets and fairs of Italy, during Mitelli's lifetime, as they were in Germany or the Netherlands. But if one compares the representations of



the charlatan motif in the art of these respective countries, one will readily perceive a profound difference: while the German and Dutch public in these pictures seems to have surrendered completely to the charlatan's spell, this is not so true of the on-lookers in eighteenth-century Italian pictures, drawn by Pietro Longhi or Tiepolo, and at the commencement of the nineteenth century by Bartolomeo Pinelli (the mood of the audience in the



28. "An infallible recipe against dying." A satire on the broadsheets distributed by charlatans.

By Giuseppe Maria Mitelli. Bologna, 1706.

engraving after Bernardino Mei, Fig. 7, is an exception). Though the folk in Italy also believed, they preserved some aloofness. The Southerner smiled in a secret corner of his being, not at the quack but at himself for his own credulity. And so Mitelli could be sure of the sympathy and applause of his own countrymen, when he composed this lighthearted persiflage on the handbills of the charlatans with their praise of infallible remedies, secret yet wonderfully simple, for the direst woes. With overweening confidence, the announcement of Mitelli's marvelous discovery is made, but a little creeping doubt insinuates itself: if you cease blowing—and who could blow forever without a pause?—you are dead all the same. As in his sketch, "Il Gigante" (Fig. 5), so here, Mitelli is bent on making the uncritical, overcredulous public the true butt of his jests, even more than the



big-mouthed charlatans. The sickle bearer is stayed in his course for a moment, but every line of his form betrays an irresistible sweeping speed—in the end, Death will be the victor.

“Secreto” is the first word of Mitelli’s superscription, and the whole performance is a travesty upon the enigmatic airs which the quacks loved to give themselves. The magic of secrecy, proved so efficacious, is attacked from another angle, this time with serious intent, by a publication of J. Primerosio, *De vulgi erroribus* issued at Rotterdam in 1668. Scoring the activities of the quacks, Primerosio remarks upon the fact that all of them, whether in Italy, France, or England, always have three or four remedies of the same kind for sale, which they declare secret in order to win the consumers’ confidence. But, he continues, mysterious means are not at all needful to a physician capable of diagnosing a disease correctly, master of the methods of curing it, and of compounding its medical remedy. Primerosio indeed remembers having heard Varandeo, a professor in the University of Montpellier, famous for its medical faculty, declare that a medicine was all the better for being known; only when it was divested of mystery could it be tested in daily practice and constant experience. The same remedies that would appear a divine aid when properly administered might become a lance in the hands of a madman when used by someone who did not really understand diseases or the methods of dealing with them.

Though this criticism strikes at the heart of the problem, such an argument can never suffice to break the power of the charlatan because it leaves aside the delicate problem of the whole relationship of patients to the doctor. Whether that power can ever be undermined is another matter; here it is possible only to indicate certain possibilities of opposition, a starting point for counterattack. What the followers of the quack are seeking is far more apt to be the mystery than the remedy itself. They can be convinced of the efficacy of known and tried remedies only when they have been freed from this thirst for secrecy to which their deluded subconsciousness has driven them. An endeavor to achieve this emancipation, however, cannot set out with arguments of a factual nature, as Primerosio does with his medical testimony; a much broader basis must be sought—if indeed, one does not consider mankind’s passion for mystery an eternal trait not subject to change. Pursuing Primerosio’s line of reasoning,



one may form some very accurate judgments, but one will never arrive at any fundamental interpretation. In *De vulgi erroribus* he undoubtedly makes some extremely exact observations; for instance, he notes that many persons are excessively cautious in their choice of a physician, often fearing to entrust themselves to one who has been long established in their neighborhood—yet the same persons will run after the first quack they see, who has paused only for a few days in town. Moreover, those very folk who begrudge every penny to the honest physician, making excuses about their poverty and the smallness of their income, will fill the impostor's grasping hands with gold. To be sure, that is "astonishing," as Primerosio says. But these patients are entrusting themselves to the propaganda skill and not to the medical abilities of the doctor; they are indeed not looking for a doctor at all; they are seeking the intimate agent of the "Emperor of *Turk's* Brother." How can they be reached, then, by the counterarguments of a physician? They pay dear for their treatments because these really are excellent: they are handled in the most correct manner, psychologically that is, and furthermore receive this treatment in the proper mood. The charlatan understands where to lay hold of them, how to capture and detain them. Laying hold, capturing, detaining are all expressions taken from the realm of physical prowess, muscular force, however subtly and unnoticeably such psychological processes may be carried out. Has a doctor ever laid hold of a patient, captured, and detained him? No, and therefore he cannot ask the same honorarium as a quack. The doctor treats only lungs, stomach, and throat; the quack treats doubt, envy, vanity, and ambition, and manages to soothe inflamed emotions, satisfying them with the flattering secret remedies of illusion, and so achieves rapid cures. The charlatan possesses followers; they are "possessed" by his spirit. Anyone who was in command of himself, holding his own emotions in check, would not wish to be possessed by another, and would not have come to a quack in the first place.

A virtuoso player upon the instrument of popular emotions and opinions was the renowned Dr. Eisenbarth (Iron Beard), whose name has become as much a byword with the Germans as that of Tabarin in France. Various portraits of this immensely successful charlatan are extant, all of them representing him as

a shrewd, deliberate, and energetic man. In the one reproduced here (Fig. 29), his eyes appear to mock the verses beneath, which he himself inspired. Two samples of this song of praise may be quoted:

So ist Herr Eysenbarth in Kupffer  
eingepregt, So kan man Ihm von gold  
Und Marmor Seilen setzen  
Was aber Gottes Hand in seine Brust gelegt  
Kan weder Diamant, noch Stal und pinsel ätzen.

(So is Master Eysenbarth's image imprinted in copper. So might one record it on gold and marble columns. But what God's hand has laid within his breast, however, can be etched neither by diamond, nor by steel and brush.)

And:

Was hier des Künstlers Hand in Kupfer eingegraben,  
Entwirfft zwar sehr genau H. Eysenbarth's Gesicht;  
Dass aber dessen Ruhm und ungemeine Gaben  
Entworffen solten seyn, vermag sie gleichwohl nicht.

(What the artist's hand has graven here in copper indeed depicts very exactly Master Eysenbarth's lineaments; it cannot, however, depict his fame and extraordinary gifts.)

It is related of many such spellbinders that often, when wrought to the highest pitch of oratorical ecstasy until the foam stood on their lips, they would so far forget themselves as to shout abuse down from the platform to their delirious listeners, calling them fools and perfect dunderheads. No other exhorter can be imagined so easily as Eisenbarth in this act. One who sees through men and exploits their weaknesses so pitilessly, without trace of Christian compassion, must despise his dupes. Only an attitude of haughty pessimism bordering on vainglory would allow anyone to practice such chicanery upon helpless followers and make them dance to his piping. A good part of the charlatan's power depends on cool misanthropy.

Johann Andreas Eisenbarth (1661-1727) had never completed his medical studies, presumably because he lacked the means, but, according to the judgment of his contemporaries,



he was in fact an excellent surgeon who never employed alchemistic mummary or condescended to sell perfumery and amulets.



29. Johann Andreas Eisenbarth (1661–1727), the famous “Doctor Eisenbarth.”

Instead, he concentrated his energies upon devising a system of shrewdly organized advertisement that was unequaled in his day. He is the great propaganda genius among charlatans. Supposedly he was born in Viechtach near Regensburg and died at Hannoversch-Münden. His education was conducted under



the governmentally authorized oculist, Biller, in Bamberg. In 1686 he came up for examination in Altenburg, before Dr. Klander, the court physician in attendance upon the Prince, who certified that Eisenbarth was sufficiently trained in the treatment of eye diseases and in operations for cancer, the stone, and rupture. Although he was not permitted to handle other cases or sell apothecary's wares, he received authorization to practice in this special field. It was not long before he had a large practice and became well-to-do, the possessor of coaches and horses and a house in Magdeburg worth 3,500 thalers; his business occupied a secretary and a large staff of other attendants. The Elector of Hanover assured him a yearly allowance of 200 thalers. More than these bare facts, however, may be gleaned from the advertising broadsheets he issued; these may have formed the basis for those satiric verses, well known in Germany, which parody the announcements of the medical quack, beginning: "I am Dr. Eisenbarth; I cure people after my own fashion; I cause the lame to see and the blind to walk." With the reality, this ballad has otherwise little to do.

Although he called himself Dr. Eisenbarth, he had in fact never attained that full dignity. Traveling about from place to place, setting up his temporary booths, drumming up trade, he became his own newspaper-publisher, producing and distributing the reports of his successes. Moreover, he understood how to make use of the popular press, then developing in Europe, for his own purposes. Thus, as an innovation, he had his articles inserted in 1724, for the first time, in the *editorial* section of the *Berlinische Privilegierten Zeitung*, where they attracted wide notice. The introduction to his *Dienstliche Memorial* (Serviceable Memorial), published in 1716 in the *Stettinische Ordinairen Postzeitung*, is written in a stilted old-fashioned German style, that adds pomposity to his pretensions; it is the sublimation of all the tricks of the mountebank:

There hath arrived in this town, to the great comfort of his patients, the highly renowned Physician Johann Andreas Eysenbarth; he cometh from Stargardt, in which town he hath performed repeatedly great and miraculous cures upon all manner of diseases, and in particular he hath healed many persons wholly blind, and but a short time before, on the 5th of September, he hath restored



sight to a woman of Landsberg, who hath been 15 years wholly blind; and he hath had under the knife many that suffered from great ruptures, also hath he removed a breast that was smitten with devouring cancer from an honest woman of Berlin, with little pain, and the same woman is now sound again, praise be to God; not to speak of the Cures of the inner and outer man that he hath wrought in great abundance. And whereas his name and good renown is known to the world, he hath been favored with excellent privileges and received in their Lands by many High Heads of State, among them Royal Majesties, in particular by His Royal Majesty of Prussia, His Royal Majesty of England and His Serene Highness the Elector of Braunschweig-Lüneburg. Further he hath been provided with good privileges by His Grace the Elector of Mayntz, also by Their Serene Highnesses the Saxon Princes, also His Serene Highness the Prince of Hessen-Cassel, and also he can produce glorious testimonials from diverse Medical Faculties and many famous cities, wherefrom it may be seen that he hath brought to light the most excellent proofs of his Arts and Sciences in the entire Holy Roman Empire, and that there is *only one* Eysenbarth, so long as God shall spare his life; he hath already practiced 31 years and through God's especial Grace he hath served many hopeless patients; but in order that the Reader who is so inclined may learn of his Sciences and Art, herewith shall be adduced only a few of the diseases that next to God he hath often cured.

Here we find all the wiles of the expert propagandist in close juxtaposition: his selfless benevolence in coming to town solely to comfort the afflicted; the high renown, trumpeted by his own voice; the cosmopolitanism implied in the universal acceptance of his fame and the gleaming laurels bestowed upon him by high heads of state who attest his cures, naturally all "great and miraculous." He reminds his readers of the infallibility that distinguishes the *one* and only Eisenbarth, thus displaying that intolerance so inevitable in the quack: "Here is my elixir, all else is prejudice." And then the attention to statistics: he has practiced "31 years"; and in the endless litany of the ills that only Eisenbarth can cure, which follows the quoted introduction, the greatest care is taken to introduce figures as circumstantial detail. Conviction is cleverly imposed by these handsome if meaningless numbers:



As for the matter of Manual Operations, no other Doctor in Germany can boast the like, in particular cutting for the Stone, of which he hath cut some 100, among them stones of the bigness of 5 to 6 and 7 ounces, that he hath removed with little pain from human Bladders, both in Old and Young. All Ruptures, let them be called as you please, whether they came at birth or not. Children and Men of 60 years hath he brought under the knife, to the number of 2,000, during the time of his *Practice*, not to speak of those he hath happily cured in every place without Cut.

Eisenbarth not only imposes himself on the public by such statistics and the emphatic declaration that no other man could do the like, but also by the intimation of mystery. Although he does not refer directly to magic potions, that is what he means by calling one of his medicines "rare and unknown in Germany." At the end of his whole exordium he lauds the miracle working, yet very cheap, "Spirits for the Head, Eyes, and Memory," an announcement of which also appeared in the *Vossische Zeitung* in 1724.

None knew better than Eisenbarth the power of numbers to carry conviction, and the effect of solemn titles, especially upon his own countrymen. That was why he bought the title of Hofrat, court councillor, in 1717, paying 200 thalers for it, and from that moment calling himself Herr Rath Eisenbarth. News of this event was furnished by the "geschriebenen berliner Zeitungen" of Franz Hermann Ortgies, under the date of February 27, 1717: "Announcement is made to the Faculties, that if anyone, in or out of the same, desireth a higher *praedicat*, he may receive it according to a moderate scale, thus, the title of Privy Councillor at 100 Reichsthalers, and that of Secretary at 50 Reichsthalers. Other titles shall be paid for in proportion. The famous Tooth Extractor, etc., Eysenbarth hath desired to profit herefrom, and hath become Court Councillor." High-sounding titles have played a great role with other charlatans as well; they tickled the humbug's own vanity and impressed the faithful. All Venice, it will be recalled, discussed the "Eccellenza" and "Illustrissimo" by which Bragadino insisted on being addressed; a man like Francesco Giuseppe Borri, who may be numbered among the "higher" impostors, also laid great stress upon being called "Excellence." This mania for distinctions is compared by



the anonymous editor of Mencken to the vanity of savants who choose pompous titles for their books: "It is furthermore not to be denied that the title indeed contributes toward the deception of the unlearned and unpracticed, which they well know who have such works printed, and spread such bait. . . . I proceed to book titles, in which Truth is certainly a rare game bird, especially as they are in general splendidly composed and promise many great and remarkable things, but in fact usually dupe the readers."

The advertising art of Eisenbarth was by no means exhausted in the preparation of his printed matter; he understood equally well the worth of oratorical suggestion and was master of that form of propaganda which penetrates the public mind gently and flatteringly, as the French lexicographer said, "through the paths of sight and hearing." A contemporary, Heumann, a professor of theology at Göttingen, reported on his ostentation: "In my youth there lived an itinerant doctor, then very well known, who wandered about to all the fairs. At the end of the last century, when I was a student in Zeitz, I saw him myself, as he was making his entry, with great pomp." What such a pompous entry was like in those days may be gathered from a chronicle of Memming referring to another quack: "On the second of July came a renowned doctor with five coaches, among them two very magnificent ones; he had by him fifty persons, among them a female dwarf, two *Heiducks* [exotic bodyguards from the Balkans], two trumpeters and diverse good musicians who played very sweetly on wood horns, also eighteen horses and two camels. He set up his theater on Rat Moat Street, where he sold his wares, played comedies before and after, and had courtly people in fine clothes." Eisenbarth called himself "doctor" without authority, and we do not know whether the gentleman who paraded in Memming had really reached the grade of doctor or not, but it is a matter of small import, for many physicians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries appeared like charlatans, while many charlatans aped the doctors. Those who bore the name of doctor might very well be quacks, and others who had not won it were not necessarily fakers. The latter were to be recognized, not by their lack of a diploma, but by their excessive parading and their claims. We do not learn from the Memming chronicle what tune the musicians played so sweetly upon



their wood horns, but descriptions of such affairs, both verbal and pictorial, always show the youth of the town keeping step behind the procession, and so it is probable that marching songs were rendered on these occasions. Rhythm has an indescribable power over mankind, and the quack knew that if he could compel a crowd to move according to a pattern he had fixed and ordained, he had mastered it as surely as the hypnotizer who forces his victims to move about as he wills.

Much information about the personal appearance of Eisenbarth may be obtained from the official documents concerning a grotesque scandal in which he was accidentally involved at Wetzlar, where the Imperial Supreme Court was located. This occurred in 1704. Two parties of bureaucrats, hostile to each other on high political grounds, came to blows about Eisenbarth, who had set up his booth in the market square. The governing party that had given him permission to do so found itself attacked by the other. The quarrel was carried up to the Emperor himself. "All-gracious Emperor, and Lord of Lords," wrote the "most deeply submissive and faithfully obedient Friedrich Ernst, Count zu Solms": "Upon that day a yearly fair was held here, at which a mountebank did not only sell medicaments, but nearly every day did also play comedies there, and there was dancing upon the tightrope; yea and in the first comedy or stage play there was shewn a trial and other things of the like nature, wherein the judge sat with a scepter, and let himself be bribed to change clothing and judgment chair with the harlequin, and at last gave the decision to hang the harlequin." The evildoer is not mentioned by name in the Count's recital, and, from a perusal of the terms in this complaint, one might conclude that the tempest was raised about a director of a traveling theater. From the answer of the defendants one learns, however, that the doctor had not "stood" in the market place more than four days, and "in any event all doctors and mountebanks are accustomed to do the like in order to bring the people more docilely about them." And Eisenbarth took up the defense in person, in a screed overflowing with self-praise. As a true advertising genius, he knew that there is no moment in life that cannot be turned to some advantage. It made no difference to him that his theater had hindered traffic, preventing folk from getting easily to the Supreme Court or passing by in coaches. A happy accident had



made him the focus of a scandal, all eyes were turned on him, all ears were inclined in his direction. Swelling with pride, he gave his testimony: "I, Johann Andreas Eysenbarth, highly privileged Physician and Surgeon of Imperial, Princely, and Electoral Personages, do herewith admit and attest, that not long since my 2 Servants were sent from Cassel to Wetzlar in order to comfort poor patients, and they did lodge pleas with the City Magistrate to let them build a Theater, which the said Magistrate did grant." Everyone was to learn that Eisenbarth was the benefactor of mankind; his sole desire was to give consolation and amusement to the poor.

The first words spoken by Eisenbarth from his theatrical platform were: "Highly honorable Sirs, I am the renowned Eisenbarth." This sentence and those which followed were full of the self-laudation nowadays denied to doctors by the code of their profession. That it was by no means peculiar to Eisenbarth, but was rather the accepted style of mountebank delivery, is evident from all accounts of critics and eyewitnesses. The actual texts of such speeches were naturally not preserved in their entirety, but a good idea of their general pattern may be gained from *The Harangues, or Speeches of Several Celebrated Quack Doctors in Town and Country*, published in London in 1762. An "unborn doctor," the seventh son of a seventh son, is represented by this work as a lecturer on the virtues of his "Friendly Pills," which, so he roundly swears, "operate seven several ways, viz., Hypnotically, Hydrotically, Cathartically, Proppysmatically, Hydragogically, Pulmatically, and lastly Synecdochically, but corroborating the whole Oeconomia Animalis."

We are forced to rely on the scanty observations of witnesses, if we wish to picture the eloquence noted by commentators and lexicographers as the strongest weapon of the quack. So thrilling were some of these speeches that, it is said, audiences were transported into a trancelike rapture. Every observer is agreed in emphasizing the length and prolixity of such orations. Evidently some special quality in the quack's vocabulary was the cause of this remarkable unanimity: the words must have been of a sort to stick in the memory quite independently of the meaning. In a carefully constructed sentence, a particular word may indeed shine out, when a thought or emotion has lent it accent, as one sometimes sees a white marble tablet on an old church



front, struck by an oblique ray of the setting sun, that gleams beyond its companions—while remaining an integral part of the building. When no idea commands them, however, words become mere words; where they are unintelligible and loosed from the context, they appear superfluous, “verbosa,” as Zacchia called the ranting of the quacks in the piazza.

The charlatan reverses the Hegelian dictum: with him, quality is transmuted into quantity. But he does not merely heap up technical terms that signify nothing to himself or to his hearers; he also distorts ordinary phrases, pouring into each a tiny drop of subtle poison that makes it shimmer with contradictory and dubious meanings. He is not interested in logical formulations and exact expression; only a man who fully accepts responsibility for what he says, or who entertains ideas that he burns to see transmitted in explicit terms, cares for accuracy of language. The charlatan avoids responsibility; he has no real ideas. Hence he is the natural foe of precision, of intelligibility. For clarity he substitutes great heat and emphasis; he makes his pointless remarks in the most pointed manner possible.

Here, in the province of word juggling, lies the chief talent of the charlatan; if his hand is quicker than his brain, as the old prestidigitator boasted, he can also say that his tongue is equally nimble. But in the flood of his verbiage there are usually some grains of truth, some half-truths. This was understood by Friedrich Nicolai, the author and publisher (1733–1811), whose cold rationalism so shocked the enthusiasts of the German Romantic movement. As a lingering representative of the passing Age of Enlightenment, he opposed the emotionalism of the new generation, tried to form a school of “common sense” and parodied Goethe’s *Werther*. To this satirical “Enlightener,” the pseudo-scientific “studies” in phrenology and physiognomy of Lavater, on which Goethe gladly collaborated, were utterly obnoxious. During a trip to Switzerland, Nicolai met Lavater and reported that he had a “characteristic way of thinking and writing in a desultory fashion” which led him to “mix everything together, so that it is usually very hard to see quite clearly what he does complain about. He indeed adduces some real facts, but these do not really have anything to do with the quarrel in question, and he omits other very essential points.” This is typical of the charlatan: it is vital to his success to introduce a few real



facts; there was some basis for the accusations he directed, for instance, against the academic recluses of the universities. At the same time, he skilfully leaves aside other truths, adds remarks that confuse the issue and distract the minds of his public like the jests of the hired buffoon. Not lying, therefore, but the clever and misleading distillation of the truth, marks the productions of the charlatan. He is a false popularizer, who seizes upon the newest discoveries and theories and makes them appear, for the moment, easy of comprehension to the masses.

The constant repetitions of words and phrases in the charlatan's flood of babble, though it repelled critics like Zacchia, Aretino, and Primerosio, must have brought pleasure instead of surfeit to the majority of auditors. And it is probable that many of them were the names of the elixirs and salves for sale, and of the wonder-working substances of which they were composed. The nomenclature of the quacks was singular enough, whether it was in the spurious Latin of Dr. Case or the conscientiously German medical language of Michael Schüppach. Also very impressive was the vocabulary taken from the field of alchemy; the very name, alchemy, conjured up a realm of wonders that lay outside common apprehension. And alchemistic terms were easily transformed into real advertising slogans. A slogan or "catchword" must be simple, capable of endless repetition, variable, and of an emotional breadth that permits each individual to attach his own private values to it. When all these conditions are fulfilled, a shorthand sign may become a whole program in itself. "Philosophers' stone," "potable gold"—of such slogans the crowd never wearied. Every repetition but served to increase the potency of their magic, and each person according to his needs sipped a different wish dream from the opalescent chalice of these phrases. Words that make a profound impression, without being an exact expression for anything whatever, are ideal for this purpose. Here the charlatan finds himself in agreement with his followers: he has never understood any subject fully, in his haste and superficiality, and his public is as anxious as he to avoid the clear and explicit words which have no power to evoke the sweet shudder of the wish dream. Exact words make a demand upon the understanding; people must find themselves in them. But one loses oneself in iridescent words, and that was what both quack and crowd desired. Drunk on illusion, the fol-



lowers of the charlatan greedily absorbed his emotion-soaked verbiage, and most readily when he painted visions of the future.

This popular taste was little understood by the academic critics, trained in the classic school of oratory, who pointed out the grievous formal errors of the humbug and carped at his lack of education. They could not realize that the shimmering word, the word that may mean nothing but carried all kinds of pleasing associations, was not a mistake but the most important weapon in the propagandist's armory; and that the length of the speech was as necessary as incessant repetition. Through physical exertion carried to the verge of vocal acrobatics, the speaker wore down his auditors and sent them into a half stupor in which they no longer noticed the lofty emptiness of his arguments. Moreover, just as patients suddenly called out of a hypnotic sleep are likely to evince an uncommon irritability, so the auditors of the quack could be roused at times into showing an angry intolerance, easily directed against his competitors. The competitor could be portrayed as the secret enemy, the mysterious persecutor who lurks in the background—most quacks have this obsession. Into the fury of revenge so awakened against the rival, each member of the audience might pour his own private grudge and so unburden himself of pent-up resentments. In this way the charlatan manages to make things comfortable for his wearied auditors; they may vent their secret emotions as easily as they unfasten constricting ribbons, buckles, and buttons, while they lounge on the benches before the orator. He can afford to scorn the "educated," for he did not address himself to them. On the contrary, the violent emphasis of his outpourings and their enlivening mixture of primitivity and bombast were designed as much to keep the dangerous "thinkers" at a distance as to impose on the simple-minded. The thinkers were obviously enemies and it was never the intention of the charlatan to convince them; he avoided rather than engaged such enemies, and fought them, in their absence, with the weapons of intolerance.

Strangely enough, the text of an actual speech of one such quack has been preserved because he himself sent it to the enlightened *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, which was leading a vigorous campaign against every form of quackery. The man who so immortalized himself was Magno-Cavallo, an East Prussian replica of the Italian charlatan, Cagliostro. The communication



of this Pomeranian wonder worker, published in November, 1790, was concerned with politics and not the sale of nostrums. It had to do with the Treaty of Reichenbach, signed in that year. Through the understanding at Reichenbach, Leopold II of Austria, brother and successor to Joseph II, had managed to avoid a war and prevent the threatening alliance of Prussia with Poland and Turkey against Austria and Russia. The mood of anxiety in Prussia was mirrored in the utopian exhortations of Magno-Cavallo, which, in the original German, degenerate into a repetitious and ungrammatical gabble that forms a perfect illustration of the charlatan's usual oratory:

At the death of Emperor Joseph II, the political horizon of Europe was darkened by the drawing together of such heavy war-like black clouds that a general war fire and conflagration seemed unavoidable.

Russia, Turkey, Sweden, Brabant were already fully aflame; and France led the whole world to expect nothing less than the overthrow of all despotic monarchies; during such a melancholy outlook for the general political science, and the general peace and welfare, Prussia also took the stage, putting in motion with singular swiftness armies, war bands, cannon, mortars, bombs. *Already* the handsome regiments leave their quarters; *already* the handsome fellows are chanting an honest adieu to the handsome girls of Berlin; *already* war-provisions, war-bands, war-cattle, war-armaments are heaped on all boundaries; *already* from hour to hour the people await postillions with the news of battles, of devastations, of laying waste, of conquests. *Already* Asia trembles, *already* Europe, *already* every Christian woman, *already* every Turkish woman, *already* every female weeps at the spilling of the dear blood of her husband, her son, her brother. Every bride is *already* raving over the loss of her bridegroom, every friend, every lover is *already* mad with despair over the loss of her treasured one; every delicate female *already* with tear-drenched countenance is reaching her arms to Heaven, sighing and screaming:

“Ah se in Ciel non è smarrita  
La pietà. Il mio Ben, la Vita  
Lasciatemi! Sola bandita?  
Ah dammi la morte sorte ardita!”

Echo: “Smarrita?—Vita!—Bandita!—Ardita—ita—ita,—tà!-à!”



Out of this flood of speech one thing at least is clear: the effective use that can be made of word agglomerations almost divorced from meaning. Never does the quack employ collective nouns; he does not refer to "weapons," but speaks instead of "cannon, mortars, bombs," using concrete expressions that have power to conjure up images, pleasing the ear and the inward eye. The ear is stormed by the incessant repetitions of "already" and the compounds formed with "war." The most striking revelation of Magno-Cavallo's technique is, however, the refrain he quotes from the Italian ditty. Here the syllables are cut adrift from meaning; they rise separately and gleam like bubbles, dancing and bursting in the air. Exploiting the purely tonal quality of the Italian song, the quack flatters his audience's ears with agreeable tones and stimulates their imagination with vivid images. All this verges on Dadaism. Indeed it suggests the perils that accompany such aesthetic tendencies; it shows how a mode of expression from which thought is banished, and which seeks only the lively picture and titillating sound, must necessarily lend itself to charlatanism, no matter from what motives it originally proceeds, and whether or not the ostracism of sense was pronounced for purely artistic reasons. When a man or a group behind a propaganda movement has enough authority over the crowd of followers to dispense with "sense" in this fashion, no effort need be made to avoid contradictions; the dupes can easily be convinced of mutually exclusive propositions at one and the same time. The great artists of mass delusion have almost always been able to achieve this highest measure of success.

If the charlatans often dispensed with logic and coherence in their turgid utterances, they were far from unaware of the need of mankind for connected narratives. Many of them were excellent storytellers. They had studied the methods not only of jugglers but of other strolling companions at the fairs and circuses: the ballad singers. In a mezzotint of Ostade's "Flemish Pied Piper" (Fig. 30) one may see such a singer, a man in outlandish costume, standing on a low stool and reading or chanting something written on a piece of paper, meanwhile pointing with a staff to a sheet of pictures behind him. Sixteen pictures appear in several rows on this sheet, each illustrating some phase of the dramatic action, and each elucidated by a verse of the singer. This illustrated narrative which the ballad singers offered



was the most primitive but the most effective form of storytelling. The little group of auditors who gather about the Pied



30. *The "Flamish Rattlatcher" or "Flemish Pied Piper."*

*Mezzotint by Robert Lowerie, after a painting of Adriaen van Ostade.*

Piper under the tree, or slowly saunter past, in the light of the setting sun, have a dreamy but calm and satisfied expression on their faces; evidently they are finding relaxation in the story. They are not transported by fear or a delirium of hope, but remain with their feet on the solid earth, drowsily passive. The



singer must know his business well, for even his little assistant, carrying the rattrap, who must often have heard the same tale, is as attentive as the rest. This Piper has prepared a trap for rats but none for men; his stories are not snares for the unwary.

The Italian speech, which calls the quack a "saltimbanco," has another expression for the singer; he is a "cantimbanco,"



31. *The wandering singer.*

*Popular colored lithograph. Naples, circa 1830.*

one who sings upon a bench. Such a bench singer is represented in a colored popular print from Naples (Fig. 31); he is a harlequin in a black mask, delighting a variegated crowd with his song and dramatic gestures. Beside him stand the costumed violin player and the alluring woman who never is absent from such scenes. The background is formed by a sheet of pictures which clearly paint the mood of the songs. The public has the taste of merriment and wit upon its tongue; these are gourmands of jollity, connoisseurs of the light fare that brings joy and does not lie too heavily on the mind. The singing harlequin possesses his audience completely, but only for a fleeting moment, a moment dedicated to jest and laughter.



How different was the atmosphere about the charlatan may be judged from a similar portrayal by Bartolomeo Pinelli, who sketched various scenes of Roman popular life in the beginning of the nineteenth century. A first glance at Pinelli's crowd assembled about a quack in a public square of Rome (Fig. 32) discovers many of the features we have noticed above: here, also,



32. *The charlatan.*

*By Bartolomeo Pinelli. Rome, 1815.*

a man stands upon a chair, hastily fetched from somewhere, and he has pictures, as well, to which he points. Before him cluster eager listeners—but on their faces is seen neither twilight peace nor laughter. Certainly, though they are hearing stories, they are horrible ones. Serpents are entwined about the quack's neck and in the pictures to which he points for emphasis may be seen other snakes, as well as crocodiles, scorpions, and two-headed monsters of the sea. As in so many other portrayals of similar scenes, the bystanders wear a curious expression, compounded of disgust and attraction. A woman, her eyes widening with fright, lifts a shocked finger. Even the strong young fellow on the right has a worried look. All those present feel a pleasant



prickle of anxiety; they crowd about their humbug like a frightened herd of animals, forgetting that it was he who first raised their alarm with his pictures and tales. Moreover—and this is the real point—this narrator has amulets and talismans for sale; they are hanging on strings over his arm. The darker the dread he can produce, the more brilliant will be the light on his protective talismans; the shuddering public will buy them more readily and for a higher price. Pied Piper and ballad singer tell their stories simply, as such, and are paid for their artistry. The charlatan tells stories, as he does everything else, in order to make sales, whether of elixirs or opinions. His enthralling yarns are but a part of his general scheme of entrapping the public, through entertainment, with an ulterior design.

Thomas Sonnet, Sieur de Courval, the opponent of Mondor and Tabarin, describing the quacks of his day, in a *Satyre contre les charlatans*, published at Paris in 1610, shows to what extremes this entertainment was carried. Some prepared their stomachs beforehand in order to be able to take poison under the eyes of the public; or swallowed crystallized sugar instead of arsenic and then extolled their antidotes. Others held their hands, also prepared in advance, into flames in order to demonstrate the worth of their ointments for burns. Such tricks afford but another illustration of the singular connection between charlatanry and legerdemain, as well as with all theatrical arts, song, speech, and story. The charlatan knows that it is not enough to lie; he must refine upon the lie, prepare it for the market place and make it salable by a variety of arts, with exotic costumes, pompous processions, cleverly designed handbills, verbose speeches that awaken dread, and the japery of buffoons who relieve and divert the masses.

It cannot be emphasized too often that the men who understood how to handle the mob in so masterly a fashion, and saw through the average citizen so penetratingly, must have despised their victims. Their art of handling men was founded upon misanthropy; it behooved the manipulator of emotions to remain coldly sober when he had intoxicated his audiences. This truth is illustrated by the stories told about Mondor and Tabarin in the *Discours des mœurs, fraudes, et impostures des charlatans, etc.* of Jean de Gorris issued at Paris in 1622. "How often have we heard them—only when they were within their own four walls



—mocking at us ; after we had filled their strong boxes with gold and they had stripped us of our very hides, they would smile with compassion and ridicule at our simplicity ! But they said that necessity, which knows no law, compelled them to exploit this simplicity and that they earned more money in their profession than we did in ours.”

The charlatans exploited not only the simplicity of men, but their weaknesses as well ; they viewed mankind as a totality, seeing persons only in their special function as buyers—purchasers of nostrums or theories. They judged this totality of consumers as an evil, weak, and ignorant mass ; only negative qualities were aroused by the charlatan’s appeals. Their psychological insight was so perfect precisely because they appealed only to this totality, ignoring divergent groups with separate interests. They knew that this method could be successful only so long as the great mass of buyers remained unchanged, an undifferentiated and therefore easily controllable totalitarian mob. An impulse toward change could only have come from an education which, beginning with the individual, cultivated divergences of mind and tended to disintegrate the mob spirit. This impulse was, however, not to be expected from the savants of the time, with their haughty caste spirit. The charlatan satisfied the yearning for knowledge and news on the part of the common people in an antipedagogical manner. He was the foe of education, of anything that could disturb the uniform ignorance of the mass ; in place of education, he offered propaganda.

## The Charlatan's Fate

BUT neither are we, my Fellow Scoundrels, without our Religion, our Worship; which, like the oldest, and all true Worships, is one of Fear. The Christians have their Cross, the Moslem their Crescent: but have not we too our—Gallows? Yes, *infinitely* terrible is the Gallows; it bestrides with its patibulary fork the Pit of bottomless Terror . . .

*From Cagliostro's speech to his friends and fellow scoundrels in the Bastille. Taken from The Diamond Necklace of Thomas Carlyle.*

THE splendor that illuminated some stretches in the lives of the charlatans was like the piercing rays of sunlight which precede a storm; it never gilded the closing moments. Bragadino was executed; Borri and Cagliostro died in the dungeons of the Inquisition, while the "enormously rich" Count de Saint-Germain and Leonhard Thurneisser, the fisher for precious stones, both ended their days in neglect and deepest poverty, not visited or consoled by any of their former followers. Of this fate the charlatans themselves were keenly aware; although they shrewdly estimated the insecurity of their fellow men and studied how to turn it to profit, they also perceived the insecurity of their own position. None realized better the hollowness of their own specious promises, or were more sensitive to the dangers that threatened to bring down their houses of cards at any hour. Ever in flight before pursuing fate, they lost composure and were always hurried. They had to seize and exploit the chances of the moment and make their demonstrations swiftly before it was too late. And so it is fully understandable that, as the anonymous author of *Charlatanerie der Gelehrten seit Mencken* says, they did not strive for "delayed" success; for them there was only a question of momentary triumph or exposure. Thus their days appeared full to the brim, a series of hasty undertakings; frantically they endeavored to grasp and drain each moment—haunted by the shadow of the gallows.

If the impostor was threatened with retribution while he was





33. Carving over a doorway of the Church of San Giuliano in Venice, showing the figure of Tommaso Rangone (1493–1577). A doctor and charlatan, Rangone himself commissioned Sansovino to execute this unusual churchly decoration and ordered the mottoes that eulogize his talents.

*By Jacopo Sansovino. Middle of the sixteenth century.*

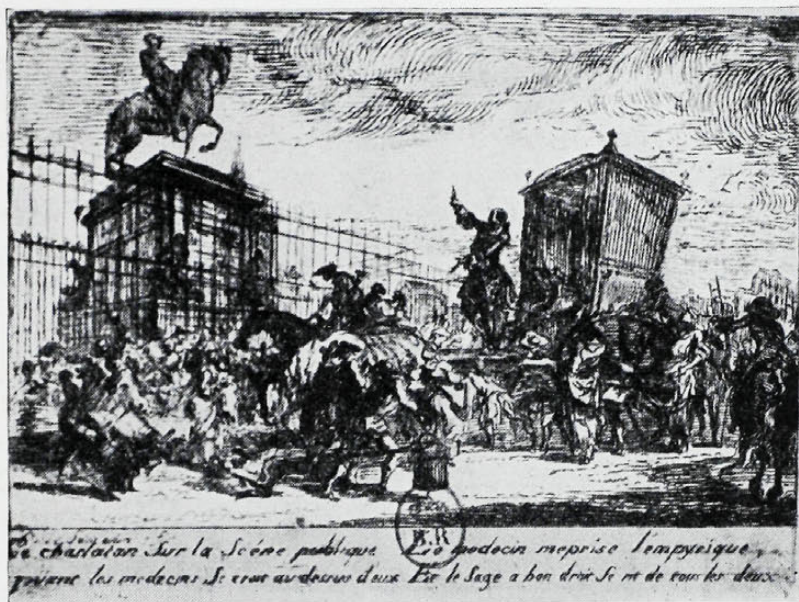


alive, so after death he was punished by oblivion. The realization of this fact appears to have mortified Tommaso Gianotti of Ravenna, or Rangone as he called himself, a medical quack of the Renaissance (1493–1577). He had studied medicine, astronomy, physics, mathematics, and literature and was still young when he came to Venice, where he won great wealth through the sale of fantastic drugs not recognized by reputable physicians. Wounded in his vanity by the thought that all this renown was so perishable, he set up two monuments to himself, during his own life, to counteract the revenge of time and preserve his name at all costs. Rangone's ostentation showed itself in a passion for building. He restored the Church of San Geminiano in Venice and had a bust of himself, executed in bronze by Alessandro Vittoria, placed there in an inner room. He also rebuilt the Church of San Giuliano from the ground up and set his own image, fashioned by the hand of Sansovino, over the door. This monument, one of the sculptor's most perfect works, is also of bronze (Fig. 33). The self-important man has caused himself to be portrayed between a terrestrial and a celestial globe, with an accompanying inscription in Latin and Hebrew, in which the great Rangone extols his own exceeding virtues. In this case, a quack is seeking to carry on his propaganda beyond the grave; Rangone could not bear the thought that he must some day cease to halt passers-by and fix their attention upon himself.

Almost three hundred years later, Gabriel de Saint-Aubin sketched a roving charlatan upon the Pont-Neuf in Paris (Fig. 34). From the height of his vehicle, the drug peddler is waving a flask of his elixir, temptingly and yet defiantly; it looks as though he were quarreling with the stony immortality of Henri IV on the monument just opposite. Such a presumption, such a painful restlessness, appear in this gesture that one almost fancies the monument has felt the challenge, and that Henri has bowed his head, like the statue of the commander in *Don Juan*, when that hero dares to disturb the nocturnal peace of the graveyard. Greatness and immortality are irritating to those who vainly strive for them. "Ce charlatan sur la Scène publique, Jouant les médecins, Se croit au-dessus d'eux," begin the verses attached to this print—"This charlatan on the public scene, playing the doctor, believes himself above doctors." Strive as he would to ignore the whisperings of conscience that his suc-



cess could not last, because built upon sands, the quack could not forget; the more insistent the still voice became, the more avidly he turned to the applause of the moment, and the more vehement became his words and gestures on the "Scène publique." It seems as though this man mounted on his wagon is trying to shout down a competitor who does not condescend to strive with



34. *The charlatan.* The quack is offering his remedies on the Pont-Neuf before the monument of Henri IV.

Etching by Gabriel de Saint-Aubin. Second half of the eighteenth century.

him. Greatness remains unmoved by the play in the public square, and because it will not wrestle in the dust with him, it rouses the charlatan to renewed vilification.

What was most to be feared by such scamps who juggled with the hope and confidence of the simple-minded, weak, and sorrow-laden, was the revenge of some embittered victim. The anonymous author of the *Charlatanerie der Gelehrten* meditates upon this subject, averring that, "when a merchant advertises on his shield or signboard wares that he does not keep in his vaults," he makes himself ridiculous but does no damage, for those who inquire after such wares may go to some other merchant. But



what shall the quack's victims do? They hear constantly that he has a monopoly of his wares, be they opinions or nostrums; one man, and only one, can give them what they desire. And if he fails them, *they* cannot simply go to some other crier in the market place; when they have finally realized the deception, they stand before an abyss of emptiness. And if the deception was cruel, cruel also is the revenge, when the victim turns upon the rogue, as Frederick I of Prussia turned upon the alchemist Gaetano.

Gaetano, or, as he called himself, Domenico Gaetano, Conte di Ruggiero, arrived in Berlin around the year 1705, in a stately coach surrounded by twenty servants in scarlet liveries laced with gold and with facings of yellow velvet. And it happened that King Frederick I of Prussia took him into his service—the very same monarch who had founded the University of Halle, where Thomasius taught, the great fighter against superstition in every form and especially in the witchcraft delusion. King Frederick, founder of the Berlin Academy of Sciences, whose president was Leibnitz, took this itinerant gold maker wholly into his confidence. What so impressed the King was revealed by Baron von Pöllnitz in his *Memoirs*: “He [the King] therefore demanded to see this wonder worker. He was brought before him. Since he possessed the gift of speech in the highest degree, he soon persuaded the King that before long he could surpass the Great Mogul in riches.” The possessor of this remarkable fluency was the son of a peasant in Pitrabianca near Naples; in his youth he had been apprentice to a goldsmith and also had studied prestidigitation, thus doubly preparing himself for the role he was to play in Prussia. In 1695 he had been compelled to leave Italy; the reason he alleged was that he had discovered the buried treasure of an alchemist together with directions for producing the philosophers’ stone. Such happy accidents are usually inserted by the charlatans in the fabulous accounts of their own lives, in order to explain those embarrassing moments when—usually on criminal grounds—they are expelled from their native land or must abandon their profession.

Much as Bragadino put off the Venetian Senate, so Gaetano postponed the fulfillment of his promises to the King; at length, under pressure, he made a few essays, realizing very well that



they were doomed to failure. He attempted to flee from Berlin, but was repeatedly captured and brought back, because the King, whose confidence in the gold maker was hard to destroy, could not do without him. One of these periods, when the King was torn between doubt and faith and the ex-peasant of Pitra-bianca was commencing to tremble, is amusingly described by the Prussian court alchemist Dippel. Ordered by the King to visit the quarters of Gaetano, he observed that the impostor was shaking with anxiety and had hung three or four loaded pistols on his walls.

As mountebanks do, he had spread on a table, before we arrived, all his public testimonials and patents for his numerous projects from so many courts; he further showed us some letters written with their own hands, by the Emperor Leopold of glorious memory, as well as his spouse, and the Elector of Bavaria, besides other princes, all of which he preserved in a golden case. We had to endure the charlatanry with patience, and pretend to admire, in order to keep ourselves in his good graces for the future.

When the King at last lost patience, he brought Gaetano to trial and had him hanged. Writing about this judgment, Dippel betrays his profound understanding of charlatanism and of the motives behind the revenge that is wreaked upon those who abuse their powers: "He was punished only on account of the deceptions he had intended and because the great hopes placed in him miscarried, and people showed this rascal far too excessive honors and caresses from the very beginning, that could not be compensated for save by the most severe revenge, particulars of which cannot be told because respect forbids it." These lines are to be found in the book, *Ein aufrichtiger Protestant* (An Upright Protestant), published by Johann Conrad Dippel in 1733, under the pseudonym of Christianus Democritus. What sort of grisly revenge that was which Dippel hesitates to reveal may be partially guessed from a popular print preserved in the Mär-kisches Museum in Berlin (Fig. 35). Gaetano was hanged on April 23, 1709. Clad in a garment of tawdry gold and tinsel, he was strung up to a gallows covered with golden cloth. At the top of the broadsheet, above this scene, appears the Latin inscription: "Fumum vendidi, fune perii" (I sold smoke, I perished by

the rope). Out of Gaetano's mouth are issuing the words of Nero, with grim mockery: "O quantus artifex pereor" (O what an artist dies with me!).

The punishment inflicted upon Gaetano is fearfully appropriate and indeed a "telling" one. Even on the gallows he was



35. Head of a fly sheet showing the gallows on which the alchemist Gaetano was hanged in Berlin in 1709.

compelled to make propaganda, but propaganda against himself. So many a charlatan, who turned his whole life into a permanent exhibition, thrusting his own person forward into the center of the stage, found at last that his chief medium of propaganda was used destructively against him: he became a warning advertisement. When the false hopes he had awakened rebounded against him, and he was condemned by the bitter knowledge born of disenchantment—then he met his end in tinsel garments, a mockery of the golden dreams with which he had poisoned the imagination of men.



**A DIGRESSION:  
BUONAFEDE VITALI**





## Buonafede Vitali

IN the eighteenth century the common attitude toward travel changed. No longer driven by a mere craving for fresh sensations, like the men of the Renaissance, the citizens of this new Age of Enlightenment journeyed to distant parts in search of more facts to broaden and enrich their stock of knowledge. For the first time, the traveler became an observer: he did not immerse himself, as the Renaissance adventurer might, in the life of a foreign land, surrendering to the pulsations of exotic rhythm. Instead, he remained the self-conscious tourist, gathering observations to carry back with him and exhibit as his property. This kind of traveling meant only a temporary break in the ordinary settled existence; pure aimless roving was less frequent than before. The professional charlatan, however, was still a wanderer of the earlier pattern; the whole scheme of his career was opposed to everything sedentary and uniform.

As modern existence grew more sedate, it was natural for the life of the charlatan to appear attractive to one who was irked by the bondage of ordinary professions. Without being a humbug himself, he might join the humbugs. This seems to have been the case of Buonafede Vitali (1686–1745), a graduate of the medical faculties of three Italian cities and famous in his day as a physician. Of his own accord, following the impulses of his nature, Vitali laid aside his scientific title and became a “saltimbanco,” a mountebank. Carlo Goldoni, the dramatist, once met the remarkable man and immediately recognized in him a very rare species of charlatan, a “ciarlatano d’una specie molto rara.”

Vitali came from Busseto in the Duchy of Parma, the home of Verdi. At twelve years of age, he was so accomplished an orator that he could discuss philosophic questions in public at the University of Parma and defend his theses in open debate. For a short time he is supposed to have been a monk; it is certain, at least, that he was an ensign in his father’s regiment, and then turned to the study of medicine and surgery, though without the slightest intention of entering upon a university



career. As a field surgeon he again entered military service, was under fire in the battles of Cassano and Turin, became wounded, and, hardly healed, traveled to Canterbury in England, where he remained three years. When the plague broke out in England in 1710, he wrote down the results of his observations as a doctor, maintaining his opinion that a parasitic worm had been the irritant causing the disease. Leaving England, Vitali went to France, Belgium, Holland, Hamburg, Lübeck, Danzig, Stockholm, and St. Petersburg. For a time he was director of a mine in Lapland, but soon turned south again, reappearing as an administrator of the royal mines in Lisbon. Finally he returned to Italy, in 1714, and there, in Genoa, he took the name which he was to keep for the remainder of his life: *L'Anonimo*.

It is curious that Vitali assumed the name of "The Anonymous One" at the moment of his return. It is as though his varied experiences of life in so many foreign lands had led him to doubt whether the whole character of a man could be described and fixed in a single name. Nameless he wished to be, not bound by any title to the existence he had once led in his homeland and did not wish to resume. Nameless he would remain, unlike the great charlatans, such as the Count de Saint-Germain, who crept behind high-sounding titles as one skulks behind a gleaming bulwark for protection. No gallows loomed on the horizon of Vitali and he had no need of such disguises. He felt, however, that in the course of his travels he had undergone continual change; his personality had been extinguished, to be created anew and again destroyed. So deeply had this troubled man pierced the problematic character of the fate that gives personalities to men and takes them away, that he thought one name was more than any individual could wear and be responsible for.

The returned wanderer made his appearance in the public squares as a mountebank, offering to answer extempore all questions, from any field whatever, that might be put to him. He meant to attract the populace as an orator and a man of rich knowledge and experience—not as a specialist and doctor. That was his gesture of protest against the learned physicians, his colleagues in the universities. The Anonymous One visited the baths of Acqui, writing on their curative powers, and then traveled by way of Leghorn and Civitavecchia to Rome, where he was summoned by Pope Clement XI to treat Faustina, the



daughter of a famous painter and wife of the poet Zappi. His success in this case drew much attention upon him; he became known as a great doctor throughout all Italy. The Neapolitans welcomed him with open arms and his renown attained such proportions that, even fifty years later, a libretto to *L'idolo cinese*, an opera of Paisiello, attested to it by calling one of the characters, a peddler of salves, the new Anonymous One, "il nuovo Anonimo."

But a nature like Vitali's did not desire fame: experience was what he craved. Leaving Naples after a brief time, he journeyed among many Italian towns; he effected a cure of Pope Innocent XIII, who had shown the greatest distrust of all other doctors. Eventually Italy itself seemed too narrow for him and he went to Lisbon, returning later to Palermo. In Palermo he was elected by the Senate in 1723 as teacher of chemistry, physics, and philosophy, and was appointed director of the state laboratories. In order to teach in Sicily, it was necessary for him to pass a doctoral examination in the University of Catania, although he had won the title of *doctor medicinae* in Parma in 1717, and two years later in Bologna. Before long, he grew restless in Palermo also; despite the friendly remonstrances of all its churchly and worldly dignitaries, including the Cardinal who had become his devoted friend, Vitali insisted upon leaving. He even set an earlier date for his departure than the Senate wished to allow; thus he happened to escape the fearful earthquake that afflicted Palermo a short while after he left.

Soon Vitali reappeared in the north of Italy, in Trient, this time as a mine administrator. By 1730 he was in Florence, where the college of medical doctors bestowed upon him the diploma of a "maestro di Sapienza." But the "Master of Wisdom" recommenced his journeys from town to town, halting for a longer stay only in Milan. His experiences in that city were summed up in a letter, published in book form, which Vitali wrote to defend the profession of charlatan. Although The Anonymous One professed the trade of the mountebank throughout his life, and never grew weary of attacking regular physicians and university professors in his published writings, yet he remained in the eyes of his contemporaries an important physician himself, whom the nobles and dignitaries of the world gladly consulted. When he entered Verona in 1743, so Goldoni reports, he was



greeted with as much frantic joy as had welcomed Aesculapius in old Greece. He was able to effect such signal cures, during an outbreak of the plague in Verona, that the city gratefully gave him the title of *Protomedikus*. His mounting fame moved the King of Prussia to call him to the newly founded University of Halle, offering him a salary of 5,000 gulden. But The Anonymous One died before he could accept this invitation, on the second of October, 1745.

"This genius of mine for traveling!" (Quel mio genio di viaggiator!) exclaimed Vitali on one occasion, and it was truly the genius of travel that conducted him through the world. Neither the necessity to earn money nor to flee from justice was, in his case, the impulse for his "continuo peregrinantur." What was mere pretension or compulsion in others was genuinely and honestly true of this charlatan. Yet more: he chose the profession of mountebank as a conscious protest against those contemporary manifestations that seemed to him to savor of charlatanry, though in high places. It is surprising and delightful to find everything topsy-turvy in the interpretation of The Anonymous One: the very manifestations which we have already noted as specifically charlatanic were, in his case, protest actions motivated by honest indignation. This philosopher and comedy writer, actor and passionate lover of the theater, was, though a splendid orator, only a mediocre writer. It is almost pathetic to see how awkward, how wholly artless are the sentences in which he announces the most astonishing and original views. The Anonymous One had the gift of humor and would never have been disturbed by the murmuring and whispering of the common folk, as Bragadino was. The pamphlet published in Milan under the title, *Lettera in difesa della Professione del Saltimbanco* (Letters in Defense of the Profession of Mountebank), was a defense of his calling against a noble patron, who is supposed to have been Scipione Maffei. From the very first lines it is apparent that the nobleman, out of his high regard for the author, had begged him to give up this degrading profession which was not compatible with his honor. Vitali replies in the spirit of a *frondeur*: honor, so he maintains, is but a point of view, a subjective opinion and nothing more. Honor is applied to anyone who happens to please the crowd; it is bestowed by a whim and has nothing to do with the merits of the individual, as one must admit if he



is honest. He agrees that there are some rascals to be found even among the mountebanks, but that is true in every walk of life and should not in itself be taken as evidence of the unworthiness of the profession of charlatanry. In his view, the turn from empiricism on the part of doctors was pernicious to medical science. It removed medicine from the risk of experimentation, which the doctors found objectionable. Empirical medicine he considered to be the only true medicine; moreover, he insisted, "this is the art of the mountebank, who shows what he can do in public." No reputable calling should shun this publicity, "and since the art of medicine is the most important, it seems to me a duty to practice it more than any other before the eyes of the public." The endeavor of Vitali to play the game with all the cards in view is far removed from the mania for mystery and secrecy which characterized all the other charlatans.

Vitali's urge for publicity, his eagerness to establish contact with the people, was not, however, devoid of theatrical elements; if he found the public square too empty of spectators on a certain day, he would announce that he could not perform cures. Like the actor, this lover of the theater needed the electric charge, the sympathetic rapport between himself and the audience. But that was not the sole reason for Vitali's predilection for the platform. His whole behavior, like his life, must have been a constant challenge, a protest against the exclusive caste of university professors, whom he not only despised but hated; he never tired of inveighing against the cloistral scholars who had shut themselves off from life. In speeches and pamphlets he accused them of losing themselves in boundless disputes instead of taking hold of reality and lending help to mankind. He declared that they entrenched themselves in their lecture halls as though they were forts, lest they come in contact with the actuality which might have enlightened them on their errors. "The professors," he said, "who consider their comfort too highly and shun the hardships of travel, who have never experienced in their own persons either the change of climate or of air, and do not dream how various customs are in the world," cannot realize "what unhappy circumstances do to one and how one feels on those luckless days when the crowd points its fingers at one." And as he rebuked the academicians for their lack of experience in life, he also reproached them for considering experience a mere handmaid of theory: the



true function of theory should be to explain and assist experience. Although he was himself an orator who could transport an audience and, as contemporaries reported, had the gift of "painting things and making them palpable," yet Vitali condemned nothing more severely than the verbose disputes of the professors. In his scale of values presence of mind stood highest; that demanded close approach to life. He despised those who climbed the platform—and he meant the actual platform as well as the rostrum of fame in the figurative sense—without effort, elevated by the arms of others. "It is fine," he exclaimed, "to elevate oneself without the help of others, and that is just what the mountebank must do every moment." That was, however, very far from being true of the charlatans he so praised; these quacks certainly climbed the heights with the help of testimonials begged from simple or titled patients. Vitali himself would have nothing to do with such methods; none of the reports about him mention any credentials or testimonials he produced as incense on his own altar. Turning in open fight on professional medicine, like the quacks, Vitali would not have begged testimonials from the colleagues he attacked.

Contemporary biographers declared that no portrait of L'Anonimo existed, and it would indeed have seemed fitting if that nameless one had disdained pictures of himself. He was described as thickset, of medium height, and stately appearance, with a lively color in his countenance and leonine traits. An engraving (Fig. 36) of Vitali has been discovered, in spite of biographers' reports; it confirms the descriptions, but in so conventional a fashion that one can just perceive a feeble reflection of his great kindness; one can scarcely guess at the humor and peculiar nature of the man himself. Much more vivid do the features of The Nameless One appear in the enchanting verbal portrait drawn by Carlo Goldoni in his memoirs. Telling the life story of Vitali, Goldoni declares that he was animated by an impetuous ambition to bring the whole extent of his knowledge into use ("aveva un' ambizione sfrenata di far valere l'estesa delle sue cognizioni"); that was the reason for his decision to renounce his position in the universities and mount the bench instead, to speak to the public. That Vitali had this ambition may well be believed; it is probable that he felt dissatisfied, not only with his colleagues, but with his profession itself. The lecture hall was



too narrow for him, the circle of activity too confined. Goldoni tells us how remarkably this charlatan could answer the most



36. *Buonafede Vitali (1686–1745), called “L’Anonimo.” A physician much esteemed by his contemporaries, he voluntarily exchanged the position of university professor for that of a mountebank.*

difficult questions from every realm of knowledge, and on the most abstract problems (“le materie più astratte”), from his booth. The medicines administered by Vitali are also praised. His stay in Milan is recounted in detail:



In Milan, The Anonymous One had the satisfaction of seeing the square where he showed himself crowded with people on foot and in carriages; but since the educated and savants were scarce in his public, he had to offer exhibitions that could attract the ignorant throng. So the new Hippocrates distributed his medicines and practiced his rhetoric, surrounded by the four masks of Italian comedy.

Master Buonafede Vitali was himself a lover of comedy and maintained at his own expense a complete troupe of comedians; after they had helped their master take in the money thrown to him, knotted in kerchiefs, which they immediately threw back filled with medicaments, they presented a comedy in three acts. With liberal generosity, they played by the light of many white wax candles.

I desired to make the acquaintance of The Anonymous One, and not only on account of his extraordinary qualities, but because of his troupe. One day, under the pretext of seeking to buy some medicines, I visited him. He asked me from what ill I suffered, or thought I suffered, and quickly noticed from my reply that only curiosity had led me to him. He had a good cup of chocolate brought for me and said that, in my condition, this was the best medicine. I found this attention extremely gracious (“*. . . la galanteria graziosissima*”); after I had conversed with him for some time, I became convinced that he was as attractive in private life as he was rich in knowledge when he appeared in public.

Goldoni, who was then young and unknown, was looking for a troupe that would agree to play a comedy he had written and in Vitali, who had himself written a comedy, he found a sympathetic patron. The troupe of The Anonymous One counted some outstanding extempore artists among its members, and Goldoni wrote a comedy for them, the “*Gondoliers of Venice*.”

Another mountebank who, like Vitali, publicly attacked the frauds and lies of his contemporaries, and had also a very original nature, was Giuseppe Colombani, for twenty-four years busily engaged in extracting teeth on St. Mark's Square in Venice. Like Vitali, also, he had come from Parma (he was born in 1670) and entered military service as a mercenary. In this manner he traveled through all Italy and even to Spain, acquiring a singular proficiency in playing the trumpet, flute, oboe, and



guitar; while in Spain he learned to dance to castanets and, in addition, became a brilliant fencer with the foils, and master of the art of swinging and flourishing banners. In Malta he attracted the notice of a Persian wonder worker who promised to give him his daughter Angelica if he would agree to entice crowds by his arts, so the Persian could sell his snakebite antidotes and extol the philosophers' stone that he boasted was in his possession. Colombani joined the Persian, but one day, when he asked Angelica whether her father could also fabricate gold, she confessed that everything the Persian did was a swindle. Immediately Colombani broke off the marriage contract and spent the rest of his long life in combating the ruses of charlatans. In 1724 he published at Venice a book entitled *The Public Treasure, Out of Which Every Man May Win Virtue, Health, and Riches*, as if to emphasize by contrast the secrecy and mummery of the mountebanks. A chief character in this work is Monsù Guascon, a surgeon who, as was customary, promised to perform all operations painlessly. To this an upright tooth puller, "onorato Cavadenti," who is the author himself, replies by saying that there are some teeth which may be extracted without a twinge, but others will not come out without pain. In this dialogue "Alfieri Lombardo," as Colombani called himself, showed much expert knowledge. His picture bears the inscription: "Quod tibi fieri non vis alteri ne feceris" (What you do not wish others to do to you, do not do unto others), undoubtedly an exemplary motto for a dentist.

It is hardly surprising that his colleagues on the Piazza, watching him collect the crowds with a minuet skilfully played upon the trumpet, became his furious enemies. Among them were some gentlemen with the habit of handling patients while they were mounted on horseback; if they broke a tooth in the act of pulling it, they would blame the horse for stamping its foot at the wrong moment. No doubt they were displeased when Colombani, in his dialogue with Monsù Guascon, declared that the relatives of the injured patients were justified in attributing the guilt, not to the horse and the unlucky accident, but to the clumsiness of the tooth puller. This Venetian dentist was a brother in spirit to The Nameless One, although he did not attain the latter's stature.

Vitali was a genius who went among the mountebanks because



he loved their vagrant life, a life led on the public squares, in the exciting proximity of many unknown persons, in the midst of living and breathing reality. The very word Vitali suggests vitality and undoubtedly there was a remarkable symbolism in this name of The Nameless One. Since he felt so attracted to the roving existence of charlatans, he thought they, too, were homeless from choice and that there was something fine and great about the disdain of a narrow fixed abode. In fact, it was just this homelessness which so many charlatans lamented as their cruelest misfortune. In Bragadino and Thurneisser, nostalgia for home was the most genuine of their feelings. In other ways, as well, Vitali misunderstood the driving impulses of his fellow mountebanks. He heard the quacks railing at science but did not perceive that their protest was of quite a different nature from his own objections to the blindness of professors to real experience. If he felt some of that mimic urge that led others to counterfeiting, it was in his case turned to the reshaping of personality; it did not tempt Vitali to falsify knowledge and truth and try to mislead public opinion. And so he sadly misrepresented the character of the charlatan in his polemic writings. "The world is a theater," he wrote, "that is composed of mimes and spectators. Upon the stage of the world, life is played, and the author of this performance has determined that every figure shall be concealed in a different costume." And, so he believed, whoever is really a charlatan should appear as one. He demanded a general unmasking. If he confessed himself a mountebank, it was because he had been mistaken about his own nature and that of the charlatans in general.

The charlatan wishes to appear other than he is, but Vitali *was* different from those about him. What connected him with charlatanry was the excessive emphasis he placed upon his own peculiarities; his insistence upon being unique led him to take a one-sided view of life and the world. This explains why the energetic man, with his distinct genius, did not hammer on the doors of the universities and transform his protest into a productive and revolutionary work in the company of his colleagues, but instead found expression for his egoism in the strolling existence which, however charming and artistic in many respects, was unfruitful and isolated. It was more unfortunate that The Anonymous One, in writing his poeticized account of the roving



fraternity into which he poured his own romantic yearnings, did much to lead astray the more critical among his contemporaries. He caused them to form a false opinion of the quack because he,



37. *Giuseppe Colombani, a tooth puller who treated patients in St. Mark's Square in Venice at the beginning of the eighteenth century. He attacked deceitful practices of his colleagues.*

who was none, took to the road and hurled his "honest protest" from a mountebank's stage.

Such types as Vitali belong to a category once defined very concisely by W. H. Riehl, in his *Culturstudien aus drei Jahr-*

*hundertten* (Stuttgart, 1859). Speaking of a German charlatan, Gottfried Christoph Beireis, a university professor of the eighteenth century, Riehl declared him to be "in any case a wonderful virtuoso of personality." In that field Vitali was also a grand *maestro*; he had that sovereign mastery over himself, that ability to make all his manifestations perfect and individual that in itself justifies public exhibitionism. Any form of virtuosity affords some aesthetic gratification, and personality-display is no exception. Those who are most responsive to aesthetic spectacles, however, who are readiest to appreciate the charlatan's accomplished voice and gestures, are also eager to hear pedantry denounced; they are quick to discern the grains of truth in the quack's fulminations against academic sterility. Such natures are easily captured by the charlatan virtuoso.

There is always serious danger in an exclusively aesthetic evaluation of life, for it disregards responsibility and obligation to society; it is blind to the disasters that must ensue when the charlatan succeeds in overturning the whole scheme of moral values and uses his nimble fingers no longer to play brilliant arpeggios at private exhibitions of his virtuosity but to manipulate masses of mankind according to his will. Because so many of the noblest men and women are inclined to rate the aesthetic values highest, they are often most readily tempted to venture into the camp of the charlatan and lend their great names and characters to advertise a cause unworthy of their condescension. Then the humble and pure-minded who admire the great names are induced also to mingle in the train of the swindler, among all the other kinds of human beings, the fraudulent, the stupid, and hysterical, with whom they do not belong. They lose sight of the charlatan who leads this strangely assorted herd in watching their heroes who have joined it. And so it frequently happens that the charlatan wins most credit and profit from the highest characters, who follow him momentarily through a misunderstanding and leave him, in shame and disappointment—but too late.

This kind of aesthetic gratification, his delight in remarkable flowerings of personality, helps to explain Goethe's bursts of interest in Michael Schüppach, Cagliostro, and the secret societies of Baron von Knigge. Fascinated by the renown of Beireis



also, he took pains to visit that humbug, but, quickly disillusioned, expressed the wisest and most enlightening judgment on charlatanry. Goethe's attitude toward superstition was discussed by Friedrich Wilhelm Riemer in his *Mittheilungen über Goethe* (Berlin, 1841). Beginning with a sentence of Goethe's, "Superstition is the poetry of life," Riemer went on to ask: "How then should the poet dispense with superstition? Why should he not turn it to account and use it for his poetry," since, as Goethe said, he gives superstition, "like every other form of fancy, only an intellectual validity" and therefore cannot be harmed by it. One may dabble in the occult and in superstition innocently, so long as it is "regarded as a mere aesthetic game."

This is a dangerous equivocation. The deep insight expressed in Goethe's aphorism was perverted by Riemer and interpreted in a contrary sense. By fancy, Goethe meant the world of ideas of the imaginative man, the kind of person the poet Hofmannsthal had in mind when he wrote: "I learn more and more to distinguish the fantastic people from those who are full of fancy, that is, those who are able to reshape reality constantly and to elevate it into a higher second existence." Imaginative persons, forever "reshaping reality," were, in Goethe's opinion, not in danger of being harmed by superstition; their playing with the fanciful was productive. Certainly Goethe did not have in mind an idle "aesthetic game," an irresponsible indulgence in trivial fantasy, as Riemer would lead one to suppose.

Nevertheless, even if Goethe can be cleared from the suspicion of taking the various fraudulent characters of his age too seriously, it cannot be denied that he and others among the noblest minds of the eighteenth century did lend countenance to a humbuggery in which the ordinary populace was only too ready to believe. Wishing only to protest against the stiff pedantry, the blindness to life, of the scientists of their time, wise and fine minds turned sympathetically, whimsically, to all sorts of pseudo scientists, nature healers, mesmerical clairvoyants, founders of sects and secret societies; but what was mere playfulness in the upper circles of society did help to make fashionable the dark beliefs that were taken with deadly earnestness among lower strata. Thus it was, wittingly or unwittingly, the most brilliant intellectuals who irresponsibly assisted in the dethroning of the

intellect. The truly imaginative did not need the charlatan, for they were not trying to flee from reality but only to transform it in the light of their ideals; but they misled the masses of the fantastic-minded folk over whom the might of the charlatan knows no bounds.



IV

THE HIGHER CHARLATANRY





## The Century of Courtier Charlatans

FRANCESCO GIUSEPPE BORRI of Milan, whose death in 1695 fell just within the seventeenth century, was to some extent ahead of his generation; he was a forerunner of that special type of charlatanical adventurer, the courtier or "cavalier" impostor, who was to cut such an imposing figure in the rococo period. As far as the marvelous mixture of science and religion that he served up to his followers was concerned, Borri indeed belonged to his own age; inwardly, he was a man of the baroque. But his career and personality, the parading and display in which he delighted, remind us of the grand flourishes of a Cagliostro. In fact, when Cagliostro became involved in the affair of the Queen's diamond necklace, his defenders compared him to the earlier "healer," thus according recognition to Borri as a forerunner, the "Cagliostro of the seventeenth century."

Although the commonplace mountebanks continued to do business from their regular stands while Borri was at the height of his career, they could no longer set the pace for charlatanry. A far more brilliant personality was about to take the limelight: the *grand seigneur* swindler. Unlike the simple, brawny, strong man of the market place, such as we see in Mitelli's sketch of "Il Gigante," the new popular hero of the eighteenth century was to be a cultivated and cosmopolitan scamp, the favorite of courts and witty salon circles, the spoiled darling of all Europe. Borri was a transition type.

Born in 1627, the son of a well-to-do and respectable physician of Milan, Borri appears to have realized, even as a youth, the value of mythical pedigree and the symbolism of names, for he announced that research into his family background had revealed, as the ancestor of his house, Afranius Burrhus who had helped Nero to the throne. After Borri was expelled from the Jesuit college in Rome in which he received his education, he led a spendthrift life in the fashionable circles of that city, studying medicine and alchemy. But as the result of a sudden spiritual crisis he declared himself converted and plunged into religious mysticism, leading an ascetic existence; disciples gathered

around him and at length he appeared as the founder of a new sect. He proclaimed himself divinely appointed to spread the Catholic religion over the entire globe and declared a day would come when all peoples of the earth, believers or unbelievers, would form one flock with the Pope as their shepherd. This was intended as a stinging criticism of the weakness of the Holy See at that time. Borri further insisted that the Archangel Michael had given him a sword bearing the signs of the seven elements, as a symbol of his mission as reformer of the church—*Capitano Generale* of the Army of the New Pope, he called himself. This general of an army of salvation pretended that angels had come for him in the night and had carried him to heaven, revealing its deepest secrets; an inner flame told him whether the voices he heard came from God or not. He admitted a chosen group to his secret order, which had six degrees. He could behold the souls of these brethren, he told them, haloed by varicolored rays, while he perceived their protecting spirits floating like bright beams above their foreheads; that was how he knew them fitted to be his brothers. From all these brothers Borri demanded a vow of strictest poverty; when they entered his order they had to hand over to him all their money.

The pious reformer was active at the same time as a doctor in the patrician families of Rome, and had close relations with devotees of alchemy. In this way he made the acquaintance of Queen Christina of Sweden, who had set up laboratories for experimental purposes in her palace, today the Palazzo Corsini, and invited alchemists to make use of them. Borri applied for this permission but was soon forced to interrupt his experiments, for the Roman Inquisition brought him under surveillance; at the right moment, he fled. He was a master of flight. Again and again he succeeded in escaping the toils, while sacrificing his dependents in the last hour. This time he turned to Milan, but after a few years was compelled to leave that city also; the Inquisition of Milan as well as that of Rome condemned his practices and expelled him from the church. For a short period he stayed in Strassburg, but his period of real glory began after he moved to Amsterdam. There he assumed the title of *Medico Universale*, maintained a great retinue, and drove about in a coach with six horses. According to the book on "philosophic fiends," referred to previously, Amsterdam was then an especially favorable soil



for charlatans. Patients streamed to him, and some invalids had themselves carried in sedan chairs all the way from Paris to his place in Amsterdam. Borri took no payment for his consultations; he distributed great sums among the poor and was never known to receive any money through the post or bills of exchange. As he continued to live with such splendor, nevertheless, it was presumed that he possessed the philosophers' stone. Suddenly this benefactor disappeared from Amsterdam. Then it was discovered that he had taken with him money and diamonds that had been placed in his charge.

In Hamburg he again met Queen Christina, who permitted him to instruct her in the mysteries of alchemy and lost vast sums of money through him. For a time Borri had a great influence upon the restless temperament of the unhappy woman. But when her means were exhausted, he moved on to the Danish court; there, within a short time, he succeeded in dominating King Frederick III so completely that he could venture to interfere in politics and give the King advice on governing his realm in a book called *Istruzioni politiche al Re di Danimarca*. This political influence he attained not through knowledge or experience but solely through alchemistic experiments; the King regarded these as sufficient evidence of ability in other fields—dupes of a charlatan commonly accept talent in one thing as proof of universal genius. After the death of his royal protector, however, Borri fled, again just in time, for Christian V, the new King, was hostile to this man who had so misled his father. Turkey was Borri's goal, but on the way he was arrested in Austria and delivered over to the Inquisition by Leopold I on the condition that he should not be condemned to death. Borri was compelled to abjure his heresies and ended his days as a prisoner in the Castle of Sant' Angelo in Rome. There he was treated with great consideration after he had the good fortune to cure the French Ambassador, the Duke d'Estrées, who had been gravely ill. From that time on many sick persons sought out the prisoner and bought his elixir, which, with customary conceit, he called *acqua degli Dei*, Water of the Gods. The picture of Borri (Fig. 38) shows a shrewd and vain man whom one would suspect of anything but asceticism and voluntary poverty.

Borri was ranked among the charlatans described in the old work on "philosophic fiends," and it is remarkable how many

scientists were included in that category. J. Becher, born about 1636 in Speyer, who had become a professor in Mainz and physician-in-ordinary to the Elector of that land, may be taken



38. *Francesco Giuseppe Borri (1627-80), alchemist and charlatan, who instructed Queen Christina of Sweden in the art of making gold.*

*Engraving by P. van Schuppen.*

as an example. His scientific merits are praised by the author, who ranked him among the mountebanks, none the less, on account of the weaknesses in his character, saying that his versatility was suspicious and that he offered his drugs "in the manner of a real quack." He occupied himself with the invention of a *perpetuum mobile* in the form of a watch that wound itself, and



also laid plans for the rationalization of various industries. He even dabbled in the financial affairs of the Bavarian court, offering a fantastic scheme to bring order into the treasury of the Elector: he proposed to exploit officials and state servants through taxes wrung from their salaries, but, as a shrewd propagandist, he knew enough to let this proposal appear disguised as a splendid increase in their pay. "Wherever he saw and heard something new, he passed it on as his own invention, if that was in any way possible, and so made it seem the most important thing in the world, but without having sufficient *steadiness of spirit* to work out and make practical even one single invention." Another scientist, Johann R. Glauber, discoverer of glauber salts (sulphate of sodium), is treated in the same manner in this work; to admirers of the man, the author replies that knowledge of chemistry is not remarkable in a chemist but should be taken for granted—only a charlatan understands the art of getting himself admired for something so self-evident. Glauber, who was born in 1604 in Franconia, never received a higher education and led a life of travel, pursuing alchemistic studies. He became rich, attaining his zenith of splendor, like Borri, in Holland, where he owned a big house with seven fireproof laboratories and the most various types of ovens. "At the same time," says the author, "he sent his medicaments throughout all Europe and trumpeted them with swollen cheeks, in the fashion of a charlatan."

The judgments of this writer were hazy. Although accurate enough in describing types and methods of impostors, his opinions on their scientific activities are not reliable, for he wrote from the perspective of the eighteenth century with its fixed scientific notions. A man of that age could not realize how vague and uncertain the boundaries of science had been in the previous century, and how ill defined was the border line between science and quackery: the search for a *perpetuum mobile*, ridiculous to a later generation, could be undertaken seriously in the earlier time. Naturally, so long as the scientific fields were so obscure, they could be exploited by the unscrupulous; there arose, accordingly, the type of the scientific adventurer. As such, both Borri and Becher were typical of their age; the sectarianism of the former, also, belonged to the seventeenth century, reflecting the religious dissensions and upheavals of that time and the desire of



mankind for relief in metaphysical contemplation. But in another sense the two anticipated the eighteenth century by their ventures into politics. In so far as his religious activities bordered on the political, and especially in his influence over the King of Denmark, Borri was a forerunner of a later type, the political and industrial swindler; this was equally true of Becher's schemes for the rationalization of industry and the introduction of planning into finance. Both men won the high favor they enjoyed at courts through just such traits and activities as were displayed by the grand charlatans of the eighteenth century—those magnificent rogues who offered not merely to gild the fates of single individuals but to bestow their benefactions upon nations and indeed upon all mankind.

Various periods in history have held up to ridicule different groups and professions according to the varying estimation in which they were held. While the Reformation poured out satires upon monks and the scholar, who was usually an alchemist, the popular humor of the seventeenth century, during and after the Thirty Years' War, played around the figures of the doctors and quacks, who stood helpless before the great plagues then scourging Europe. Molière's *Malade Imaginaire* gave literary expression to this scorn of the medical fraternity; and in the beginning of the eighteenth century the caricatures of Hogarth still pitilessly lampooned the doctor. But as this century wore on and the influence of the great charlatans grew to immense proportions, the people aimed their shafts rather at lawyers; in so doing, they unconsciously admitted that they took the impostors too seriously to laugh at them. These generations upon whom Cagliostro and Saint-Germain preyed, however, were extraordinarily acute, fond of wit and pointed satire. Indeed, the strange dualism of the eighteenth century, that could present the calm and skeptical intellectualism of the Enlightenment, and yet accept the deepest superstitions like alchemy, remains one of the most curious manifestations in the history of the human mind.

The seventeenth century had been fond of system; the eighteenth progressed from systematization to experimentation, from deduction to induction. Whereas the seventeenth century had but *one* expression for an idea, the succeeding age could convey a thought in many ways. Here, then, were important sources of



disturbance to mental security; experimentalism and a vague, because no longer simple, mode of expression, brought confusion even while they advanced scientific reasoning. The relativist view of ideas that had begun with Montesquieu gradually penetrated the religious sphere; increasing intellectualization was disturbing to the emotional life of multitudes. Religion, as we have seen, had been deprived of much consoling power in the seventeenth century, when visions of heaven faded and only hell was clearly reflected in the mirrors of eternity held up by preachers; but then metaphysics had opened a safety valve for pent-up emotions. Now, in the eighteenth century, that was clogged up as well by the antimysticism of Rousseau and his pan-moralism. And all the while new desires were being awakened among ever larger portions of the populations as colonization proceeded and the import of foreign wares increased; through the growth of manufactures former luxuries became comforts within the reach of ordinary citizens. But as habits were refined, heavier demands were put upon the nervous system by the spread of luxury and pleasure. Mental insecurity, emotional confusion, fresh stimulation of the nerves, new desires, new needs—and to these, one must add, new apprehensions—combined to produce an atmosphere favorable to charlatanry.

Under the polished surface of the eighteenth century lay dark fears. Men no longer felt that old Christian certitude in the face of death which Leonardo da Vinci had expressed by saying: "As a well-spent day brings a joyous sleep, so a well-spent life draws after it a joyous death." In this age of refined enjoyment, men wanted to pass life well and above all pleasurable, but they were no longer able to envisage a "joyous death," for they lacked that feeling of dutiful responsibility that enables a faithful Christian to face without trembling the judgment seat of the Almighty. On the horizon of the future loomed the guillotine; there was an ominous feeling of doom in the air, but moralizing seemed detestable in a present still so full of gayety. Fearing the future and shunning admonition in the present, the only avenue of escape was a flight into the past. This wish was met halfway by the charlatan with his account of origins veiled in mystery—sometimes he pretended to be centuries old.

Faced by the mounting expectations of his audience, the charlatan had to enlarge his offers. By fabricating gold, he prom-



ised not merely to enrich his dupes but to elevate them into a higher social class. His universal panaceas were to do more than cure all diseases: they were to heighten the ability to enjoy life. Most important of all, he proposed to lengthen existence, postponing death and allaying the fears connected with it. For all these reasons, charlatanry became the sensation of the day, the fashion; fashion bore the charlatan to his triumph, and the charlatan, like fashion, dominated the age. Again, a correct diagnosis of this phenomenon is to be found coming from the small minority of the skeptics who were immune to such suggestions. In a little-known article, "On the Newest Fashionable Quackeries and Charlatanries," contained in Bertuch's *Journal of Luxury and the Modes*, for October, 1789, the famous doctor, Christian W. Hufeland, pointed out with astonishing penetration the symptoms typical of the eighteenth century. Speaking of fashionable diseases and cures, he said: "Both are effects of semi-enlightenment in medical matters. The world wants to be deceived, that proverb was never truer than today. People demand by all means something new, wonderful, and splendid; common medicine is boring, it puts one in an ill humor, it does not agree with the butterfly life of our day. And so this army of ignoramuses, cheaters, and sly-pates venture to trumpet forth ever new, ever more promising things, and mistreat our health and purses in the most wretched way." The article also touches upon the mode of advertising such wares:

We live in a time of popularity, and even the most serious sciences are now forced to lay aside their pedantic mien and learn to robe themselves in a pleasingly fashionable garb, so that they will no longer be denied entrance to any ladies' club. They [the quacks] have made themselves indispensable, and where is there now to be found a circle in which good taste prevails, where one does not hear talk of elemental fire, magnetism, electricity, the prime causes of things, yes, even about the most abstract subjects of metaphysics, and all with a facility and interest that throw one into astonishment?

If, at an earlier time, charlatanry exploited the fields opened up by alchemy and "chymical" medicine, with the assistance of legerdemain, it was observable that now, when far wider vistas were offered by the advance of science, the charlatans still em-



ployed the most ancient means of attraction; they excited the imagination of the gullible by the same methods that their predecessors of the Renaissance had found so effective. Politics was the aesthetic game to which the eighteenth century was devoted, but alchemy, like eroticism, was an ingredient of the play; women's hands dealt many cards, and those of alchemistic charlatans planned moves. Saint-Germain and Cagliostro, and even a grotesque figure like Magno-Cavallo, dipped their fingers in politics; and statesmen had now to defend themselves against charlatans as keenly as physicians had formerly done. Industrialists had also to beware of mountebankery, now that so many mechanical inventions had brought new prosperity to industry, and countless adventurers proffered secret plans for improving manufacturing processes. These scions of divine ancestors could pretend that they had inherited prescriptions not merely for elixirs but also for dyes, or directions for spinning silk and making pottery. Industry thus became mythologized. And this industrial mythology was readily swallowed by the common man, who could not understand the rapid transformations then taking place in industry with advancing mechanization. The masses, feeling the burden of this new knowledge yet awakened to new wants as well, were in a mood to accept a man who could pretend to universal wisdom. This had been obvious at the opening of the century, when the Scottish adventurer, John Law, founded his "Compagnie des Indes" at Paris and, since India was no longer exotic enough for the feverish imaginations of his victims, covered his emissions of paper with presumed possessions on the banks of the Mississippi, fabulous territories supposed to be rich in gold and other metals. Thus John Law shrewdly united the traditional counterfeiting of the charlatan with the latest discoveries. For the first time money was issued on the basis of nonexistent values. In this episode, which culminated in a financial debacle for France, it is interesting to see how the charlatan made purely materialistic considerations the center of his show without injuring his appeal to irrational emotions. Here we find a thoroughly materialistic and grasping stratum of society falling in love with an illusion and hoping to satisfy its pecuniary desires by fantastic means.

Materialism has, however, never yet proved incompatible with enthusiasm for the irrational. Money is the focus of a mounte-



bank scene in an eighteenth-century engraving by Miger after a drawing of Touzet, a pupil of Greuze (Fig. 39). The motif of the scene is announced by the first line of the verses underneath: "*L'argent fait à chacun jouer ici son rôle*" (Money makes



39. The charlatan. The verses open with the line: "*L'argent fait à chacun jouer ici son rôle.*" The grenadier is enticing a young man to recruit with a bag of ducats.

Engraved by Simon Charles Miger, after an original by Touzet. Paris, circa 1800.

everyone here play his role). The martial mountebank, elevated on his carriage, is using a saber as an instrument for drawing a tooth, while the fair one at his side proffers a miracle-working lotion. The general excitement, the light fever induced in the public, is being turned to good account by a grenadier, who is endeavoring to enlist a young man ("*Par l'appas des écus per-*



dant sa liberté, Du métier des héros va faire apprentissage"—losing his liberty through greed of money, he apprentices himself to the trade of heroes). In a window above the scene another soldier is seen drinking with a newly enlisted recruit. In the background a harlequin, high on a platform, is adding to the stimulation of the overwrought audience.

Money and mysticism were especially close in the case of the lotteries, then becoming a fashionable mania. The numbers in the lottery were associated with cabalistic ideas and it was supposed that the charlatans, who had the key to such occult lore, must be able to point out the winning tickets. In a French engraving of the age (Fig. 40) the great Cagliostro is shown receiving elegant ladies, who have come to consult him for cabalistic advice on their tickets. The charlatan pretended to control the lottery as well as the plague through his mysterious powers, and so the two are associated in a little jingle that appeared in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in October, 1793:

Die Pest gab die Natur dem Oriente.  
Unbillig ist sie nie.  
Dafür gab sie dem Occidente  
Die Zahlenlotterie.

(Nature gave the Orient the plague. It is never undeserved. To make up for it, she gave the Occident the numbers lottery.)

Most people identify the eighteenth century with the movement of the Enlightenment. But beside the cool, clear stream of rationalism ran dark Romantic currents. The stirrings of the *Sturm und Drang* were evident before 1765; the cryptic "Magus of the North," Johann Georg Hamann, was uttering his impassioned obscurities. In England the philosopher Shaftesbury had introduced his hypothesis of intuition, connecting the individual with the deep instincts of the race; the "Night Thoughts" of the poet Young were echoing in France, which gave to England, in return, the anti-intellectualism of Rousseau. Dreamers and enthusiasts were busily delving into the past, reconstructing its myths and legends, picturing bygone ages with poetic nostalgia, even while the leaders of the Enlightenment were pointing to the future. On the fringe of the Romantic movement were semicharlatanical figures like Lavater who exalted the

individual and the "Genius," or the Scottish literary forger, Macpherson, who imposed on all Europe with his "ancient" epic of "Ossian," arousing with his falsified image of the primitive world a new sense of the mystery and terror of the past.

As always happens, the new ideas that produce such noble



*40. Cagliostro is visited by three ladies of rank seeking to learn the numbers that will turn up in the next drawing of the lottery. His cabalistic wisdom was supposed to permit this glimpse into the future.*

*Popular French print, supposedly from the time of Cagliostro's stay in Paris, 1785-88.*

fruit among the highest minds tended to be debased as they were popularized. The poetic and romantic sentiments which flowered in literature became not only flat and stale but dangerously close to superstition when they were taken up by the fashionable world. The salon elegant who talked about the dualistic relations



of soul and mind and declared himself eager to lead the heroic fight in defense of the noble soul against ugly, hateful, critical reason, was in reality surrendering to the darkest forces; he was narrowing the realm of the rational and accountable and widening the powers of the irresponsible emotions. All this chatter helped to promote the success of charlatans; a swindler like Cagliostro could appeal to the tender, pampered hearts and exquisite souls of his followers, and cajole them into dismissing the warnings of critics as malicious aspersions from the overly intellectual. The Swabian poet Hölderlin gave some good advice to those who suffered from this bewildering dualism:

Hast du Verstand und ein Herz, so zeige nur eines von beiden.  
Beides verdammen sie dir, zeigst du beides zugleich.

(If you have a mind and a heart, show only one of the two. Both will condemn you, if you reveal both together.)

The systems of magnetic healing which developed out of Franz Mesmer's animal magnetism and brought renown to such persons as Johann Gassner and Johann Georg Schrepfer were especially adapted to profit from this contemporary delirium of feeling. Not all of these magnetizers were rogues, however dubious their methods, for the idea of magnetism they borrowed from Mesmer belonged to another sphere than that of quackery. But the appeal of their magnetic treatments was assuredly not solely "scientific"; the charged field of sensitivity, the "mesmeric rapport" set up between the magnetizer and his subjects, was not without relation to the fashionable ideas on the "mating" of kindred souls. The highly eroticized atmosphere in the second half of the eighteenth century was favorable to magnetism, as it was also to horoscope casting. The young Venetian astrologer sketched by Maggiotto (Fig. 41) intimates as much by the way he touches the hand of the inquiring young woman with his fine fingertips, and, looking deeply into her eyes, holds her hypnotized in tender submission. Questions asked of the future were questions of love; and whoever answered them knew how to weave the atmosphere out of which such desires came and in which they ended. The currents passing between human beings, the power of touch, were given a respectable label by the fad of magnetism,

ostensibly an objective science of sensibility; this was pleasantly lulling to the conscience.

No longer, as we have said, was the ordinary quack of the market place to be considered the leading type of charlatan.



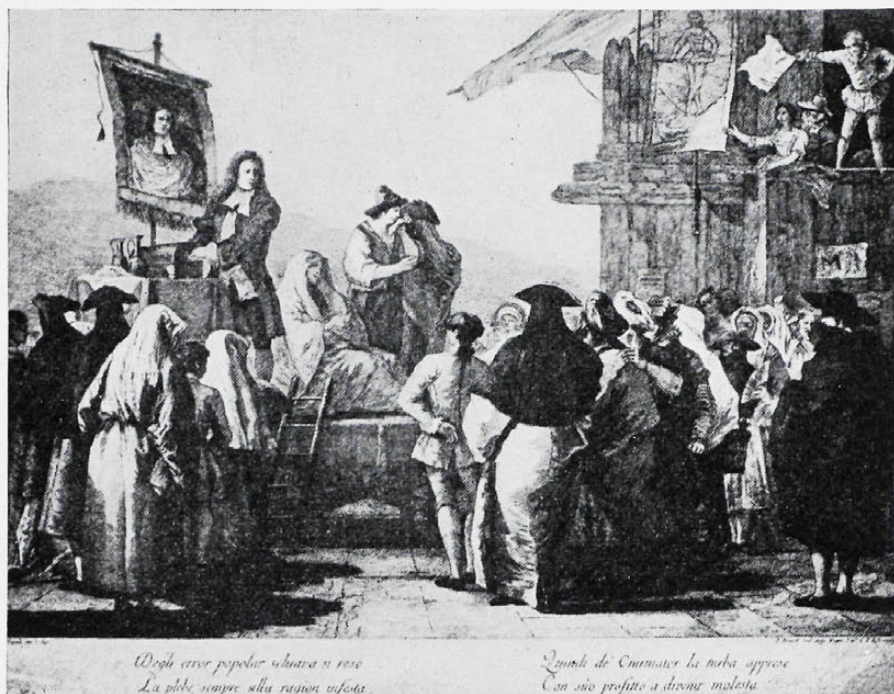
41. *The astrologer.*

*Engraved by Giovanni Volpato, after an original by Domenico Maggiotto. Venice, 1770.*

Rather did the manners of the market place reflect those of the great representative courtier charlatans who were ever in motion, now basking in the beams of princely favor, now plunging into misery, and always altering name and personality as they journeyed through Europe. Tiepolo shows us the change that was occurring even in the public square in his portrayal of the



"Ciurmator." (Fig. 42). *Ciurmare* means both to practice magic and to prepare magic potions; this magician stands by a typical chest of drugs, and above him floats a kind of procession banner bearing his own features. The emotional atmosphere is indicated by the veiled mediumistic woman in white who occupies the center



42. The "Ciurmator." The charlatan exhibits his own features on placards and advertisements, awakening the curiosity of his public by emphasizing the uniqueness of his personality.

Engraved by Giandomenico Tiepolo, after Giovanni Battista. Venice, 1779.

of the stage, by the figures high in the right-hand corner who exhibit a placard and brandish a flag, and by the mummery of the veiled and masked spectators themselves; here is the lascivious secrecy of the masked carnival, exploited by the charlatan.

The Ciurmator has reached a high point in shameless fascination of the masses: he has put on exhibition his own features, his own private life, to further the sale of wares. This was not so usual earlier: Dr. Eisenbarth, for instance, boasted only of his



countless successful operations, his marvelous *Spiritus* and, carrying exaggeration to a pitch, of his remarkable knowledge. But the new charlatans who were forever pointing to their own faces and persons and putting in circulation anecdotal revelations of their private lives knew that it was no longer enough to emphasize learning. The public had become weary of every kind of "knowledge"; it wanted only tidbits to satisfy its curiosity. What it really suffered from was an insatiable superstitious desire for the demoniac genius. Even the tooth pullers perceived this; they no longer went soberly to work after a few flourishes on the trumpet, like old Giuseppe Colombani; the modern extractor shown by Maggiotto (Fig. 43) has his own portrait on a banner behind him, triumphantly exhibiting a drawn molar. The verses announce that not one man in a hundred could compare with this operator. "*Fama volat*," may be read on the portrait placard, a masterpiece of personal advertisement.

Theatricalism and mystery, in a correctly compounded dosage, gave power to the charlatan; better than any other, the Count de Saint-Germain, the most interesting of such figures in that century, understood how to mingle these two ingredients and show a sovereign mastery over the peculiar opportunities provided by his age. His origins were unknown to his contemporaries and cannot be ascertained today. Some said that he had won a great fortune through a marriage in Mexico and that he had absconded with it to Constantinople. Other traditions, quite as groundless, pretend that he was a Portuguese Jew. "The famous alchemist," he is called by the inscription on the portrait left to posterity; the countenance it shows is dateless and betrays no secrets; the glance is veiled. The Count himself liked to relate that he had been among the wedding guests who gathered to feast in Cana when Christ performed the miracle of the wine. At other times he preferred to trace his descent through the Spanish royal house or the princely family of Rakoczy. He was master of several languages and had journeyed in many lands; his anecdotes ran lightly across the centuries. Moreover, he was constantly changing his name, calling himself now the Marquis de la Croix Noire or Comte Surmont, and now Count Welldone. His violin playing is supposed to have been excellent, and he occasionally engaged in the counterfeiting of pictures, an art that has always had a peculiar fascination for charlatans of all ages.



It is at least ascertainable that he stayed at The Hague in 1735 and that in 1744 he was in England; in 1759 he won the favor of the Pompadour in France by his rejuvenation water. He

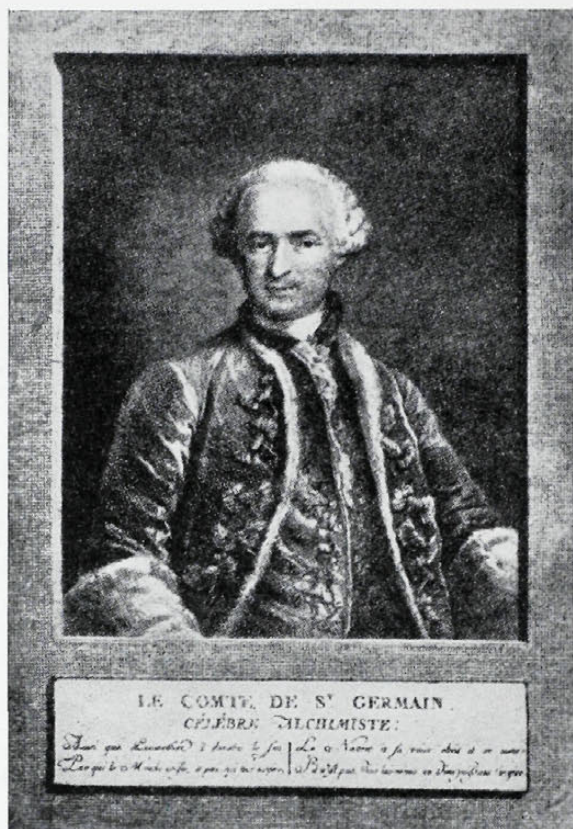


#### 43. The toothdrawer.

*Engraved by A. S., a copyist of Giovanni Volpato, after  
Francesco Maggiotto. Venice, 1770.*

then played some role in the negotiations for peace between France and England at The Hague. After the Duke de Choiseul broke his influence in France, the adventurer disappeared and for years nothing was heard of him; but then he turned up again in Russia and Italy and attempted to make his fortune in Prussia by drawing up ambitious schemes for founding factories to exploit secret processes. Failing to win the confidence of Frederick

the Great, he died in very reduced circumstances in 1784 at Eckernförde in Holstein, near Kiel. With medical matters he occupied himself little, though he did prepare a costly Elixir of Life which is known even today as Saint-Germain Tea, an aperi-



44. *The Count de Saint-Germain. This portrait, on which the charlatan is called a "Célèbre Alchimiste," is the only one known to exist.*

*By N. Thomas.*

ent drink brewed chiefly from senna leaves. The Count managed to persuade his followers that he was persecuted and threatened with injury by a mysterious enemy, a Great Unknown. The old "homesickness devil" of Thurneisser thus reappeared with Saint-Germain as a silent foe who pursued him over the earth, endeavoring to rob him of the philosophers' stone and all the marvelous secrets of dyeing, leather working, and silk spinning which he pretended to possess.



A vivid picture of this wonder worker, which incidentally betrays the reactions of the writer himself, a man predisposed to believe in marvels, is contained in the *Erinnerungen* of the diplomat and theosophical *bel-esprit*, Baron von Gleichen (1733–1807). “On my return to Paris in the year 1759,” avers the baron,

I visited the widow of Chevalier Lambert, an old acquaintance. Following me I saw enter a very thickset man of middle height, who was clad with great and recherché magnificence. He cast his hat and sword upon the hostess’ bed, sat himself down in an armchair by the fireside and immediately interrupted the gentlemen who were then engaged in conversation, with the words: “You do not know whereof you talk. Of this matter I alone am judge. I have gone to the bottom of it as thoroughly as I have exhausted music, which I had to give up because I had reached its utmost limits.”

This entrance surprisingly recalls that of a common mountebank; for the “higher” as well as the lesser charlatan, it was important to make an effective and imposing first sentence that could be completely understood and remembered. One must spring before the footlights, without paying heed to the looks cast at one, whether benevolent or displeased; nothing matters but to be seen. Gleichen soon learned that this cavalier was the famous Count de Saint-Germain, who was accustomed to pass whole evenings at Versailles and had been given an apartment in the Château de Chambord by the King. The hostess, inviting Gleichen to return the next day, expressed her flattered appreciation of the privilege of entertaining the miracle worker. In that spirited society charlatans were welcomed guests who adorned any home and raised the self-confidence of hosts.

“The impudence of the man,” Gleichen continued, “held me in respectful silence for a long time at this dinner.” The effectiveness of the impostor’s technique is clearly revealed between these lines. Then Gleichen ventured a few modest remarks which the Count was gracious enough to acknowledge: “‘I am satisfied,’ he said to me.” He began to unfold his treasures in a climactic sequence obviously planned to excite his audience: first pictures, next an opal of monstrous size, and then tinted diamonds of astounding perfection. “I thought I was beholding the treasures of Aladdin’s wonderful lamp,” said Gleichen, involuntarily

choosing a comparison from the fairy-tale realm of the Orient. "I remained until midnight and left him as his devoted follower." But disillusionment intervened.

For six months I followed him with the most submissive persistence and learned nothing from him save the practices and peculiarities of charlatanism. No man possessed such a gift as he of arousing curiosity and turning credulity to profit. He knew how to tune his anecdotes to meet the receptivity of his hearers. If he were relating an event from the reign of Charles V to a dunderhead, he would frankly confide to him that he had been present at that time. But if he spoke to a somewhat less credulous person, he would merely picture the smallest circumstances, the mien and gestures of the principal characters, yes, even the room and the spot on which they stood, in minute detail and with such vividness that one received the impression that one was listening to a genuine eyewitness of the incident. At times, while repeating a speech of Francis I or Henry VIII, he would pretend to be distracted and say: "The King turned to me . . .," but would quickly correct himself and hastily continue, like a man who has let something slip, "turned to the Duke . . ."

Such a master of effects could not fail when he sought to charm whole nations as well as individuals. The French savant, Pierre Jean Grosley (1718-85), wrote: "Cleverly did he seize upon the special tastes of every country where he showed himself; and he managed thereby to make himself attractive and pleasing everywhere. During his first trip to England he discovered a great predilection for music and delighted us with his violin playing. . . . Italy found him on the level of her virtuosos and also of her finest connoisseurs of the antique and the more modern art. Germany placed him on a level with her most dexterous chemists . . ." He understood equally well how to cater to the prevailing fashions in science as may be seen from the interesting account of Horace Walpole, Lord of Oxford (1717-97), who met Saint-Germain in the salon of Madame d'Urfé, a devotee of the occult. Madame d'Urfé wore at her throat a great magnet as an ornament. One day, so she maintained, this magnet would attract the lightning, and in this manner she would rise to the sun. The famous swindler immediately assured her that this



would infallibly occur, but that he alone possessed the power to increase the magnet's strength a thousandfold. It is easy to see how a time when such gross misunderstandings of natural science were current could offer superlative opportunities to the impostor. Walpole did not permit himself to be ensnared, but, even while rejecting Saint-Germain, he admitted: "In any case, nobody could converse better than he."

Referring to his industrial secrets, one day the Count observed that he intended to offer them to the Russian Czarina, whom he particularly venerated. He was sure that these processes would serve the interests of trade and commerce between Saxony and Russia and also solidify their political relations, bringing both countries to a state of perfect happiness in which neither could do without the other. In this remarkable mixture of magniloquence and utopian plans for reforming the world was voiced a correct, almost prophetic recognition of the part economic considerations were to play eventually in the alliance politics of these states. Undoubtedly Saint-Germain was no mere brainless rogue. But his attempt to play politics in France was not fortunate.

What commissions were given to the adventurer by the King of France and Madame de Pompadour when they sent him to The Hague in 1760 can no longer be determined. He appeared there as a mysterious messenger. In their first letters home the ambassadors of the foreign powers treating there reported coolly upon him, carefully preserving a distance but nevertheless indicating that they did, after all, take Saint-Germain decidedly seriously. Especially the Russian Ambassador, Count Bentinck, showed a high esteem for this strange man, supposedly the owner of fabulous riches, which he was said to carry about him as a minute object of indefinite form, a kind of philosophers' stone. This kept him from having to accept vile money from others, a thing which all charlatans felt would be fatal to do in public.

But while these suave courtiers were composing their polished reports, a solitary diplomat, Baron Thaddeus Reischach, the Austrian Ambassador, refused to be imposed on. In his musty epistolary style he was voicing suspicions which were shared by his royal mistress, Maria Theresa, to whom he wrote on March 18, 1760:

In music and especially in playing the violin, he [Saint-Germain] is very adept, and it appears from his manner that he has everywhere frequented *le grand monde*. . . . He does not lack wit and the ability to express himself fluently. But when he is entrusted with business, it seems to me that he speaks too much and does not measure his discourse sufficiently according to the rules of prudence . . . What is reported to me about the conduct and doings of the so-called Count de Saint-Germain I listen to, indeed, but nevertheless I usually avoid mingling in matters which cannot interest me beyond receiving intelligence of them.

The despised *Reglen der Prudenz*, the rules of prudence, seemed to the Ambassador the surest guide amid the snares of the adventurer.

Apparently the Count suspected hostile forces at work behind his back in Paris, and to guard against them wrote to Madame de Pompadour: "I was so successful that I believe France has no more responsible, true, and constant friend. Be assured of this, gracious lady, even if you chance to hear the opposite. . . . You can give Europe peace without the annoyances and difficulties of a congress. . . ." The Pompadour was indeed happy to let the alchemist brew beauty water for her boudoir, but in politics she preferred to let sound common sense be her guide, and so she handed over the letters to her Minister, the Duke de Choiseul, who completely disavowed Saint-Germain. In shame and disgrace, the latter was forced to disappear from The Hague. And Messieurs the Ambassadors smoothly reported to their governments, in the accents of accomplished courtiers, that they had never expected anything else.

Christina of Sweden, the King of Denmark, and other rulers had formerly stood as diligent pupils by the retorts and crucibles of the alchemists. But now Saint-Germain managed to mythologize industrial possibilities so adroitly that many a needy prince was glad to become his apprentice in various handicrafts. A confidant of the Marquis of Ansbach, at whose court Saint-Germain stayed between 1774 and 1776, reported: "To see the Prince and his intimates in a workshop, transformed into tanners and dyers. . . . The most beautiful cordovan leather had already been produced with great ease and negligible cost, and in the joy of his heart, the author had shoes made of it, which



turned out extremely well, but went to pieces within the first twenty-four hours."

Undoubtedly this extraordinary adventurer, who analyzed the weaknesses of his age so well, and also glimpsed some of its potentialities, was unusually intelligent; he was an entirely modern man in old-fashioned costume. As such he appears in the correspondence between the Austrian State Chancellor, Prince Kaunitz, and the Minister Plenipotentiary in the Austrian Netherlands, Count Carl Cobenzl. The letters dating from 1763 which we take, together with other contemporary utterances, from the excellent biography of G. B. Volz, show the Count working in that field of activity, the industrial hoax, which he made peculiarly his own. These two correspondents embody the two eternal types of the predisposed victim and the immune skeptic so clearly that we seem to be spectators at an ancient comedy played in the narrow frame of an intimate theater.

The first letter from Brussels to Vienna announces:

About three months ago there passed through here the man well known under the name of Saint-Germain, and he sought me out. I found him to be the most remarkable man I had ever encountered in my life. About his origins I do not have exact knowledge yet; however, I believe that he has sprung by a secret alliance from some powerful and famous house. He possesses great means but lives with extreme simplicity. He knows everything and exhibits a most admirable honesty and goodness of soul. In the circles of my numerous acquaintances I have watched him with my own eyes performing some experiments. . . .

There follows a recital of Saint-Germain's arts: transmutation of metals (alchemy), leather-working, dyeing of silk and wool, coloring woods, the production of painter's colors, and a secret method of obtaining the best oil of Provence from rapeseed. With few exceptions, these secrets were intended to provide *Ersatz* materials, substitutes; that is to say, they were a sanctioned form of counterfeiting. "All these products were made under my eyes and are in my hands. I have had them most carefully examined, and since I perceive a profit of millions in this, I have made use of the friendship which he shows me to entice all his secrets from him. He confides them to me, and demands



only a moderate share of the profits, and only, be it understood, if there is a profit."

The answer of the State Chancellor begins: "Today I shall only refer to the miracles which the notorious Count de Saint-Germain is to encompass for Your Excellency. I see things from a distance and therefore without the magic of stage effects. But you write to me of facts, of experiments made under your eyes. . . ." The ironical Kaunitz at once detected this bait of friendship and by his "distance" he meant one of mentality as well as of space. A nature like his, however, could be inspired with respect by facts, and he was not instantly ready to believe that facts, even when a charlatan produced them before witnesses, could cease to be facts: "Without the facts brought forth by you, the story would have amused rather than impressed me." In any case he recommended caution, and sent to Cobenzl the report of a confidential agent on various duplicities of the Count which had been revealed at Paris. This made not the slightest impression on the credulous Ambassador. But the Chancellor himself did not quite dare to surrender the faint possibility that there might be something in the story and so he hesitated to step in with an abrupt prohibition. He demanded "more positive" news about the kind of riches owned by the miracle worker and reported on the matter to Maria Theresa, though in a most deprecatory manner; he showed even to her that there was a chance of finding something practical among the secret receipts. But the reply of the Empress was clear and straightforward. With her own hand she wrote on the margin: "I am completely convinced that the picture drawn by you is more accurate than that of Cobenzl and that this foolishness must be kept secret. I could wish that the Minister were cured of it."

Nothing deflected the Minister in the slightest degree. Wrapped in the blissful insulation of the devotee, the initiate who "knows better" than outsiders, he averred that these wonders were both so mighty and so simple "that I should not be surprised at all if Your Excellency would not believe in them." A new description of the demonstrations was more enthusiastic than the first; further, he developed a plan for financing the scheme. The costs should be "not excessive," and the owner of a great commercial house, Madame Nettine, was ready to take a share. Further to attest the genuineness of the Count,



he reported on letters of the Most Christian King of France and of the Pompadour, mentioning the noble house with which the adventurer was supposed to be connected; definite details were not given, however, because Cobenzl could not break the pledge of secrecy he had given in sign of friendship. Moreover: "He has a thousand chemicals in his room, with which he does nothing at all. He strews them about, so no one can discover those he really uses." Only by friendship, never through surprise, could one draw a secret from a character like the Count's. "He speaks of his riches, and must have great possessions, for everywhere he was, he made splendid presents, spent a great deal, and never asked anything of anyone."

The echo from Vienna was cool: "The reports of Your Excellency that were intended to dispel my doubts about all the miracles that M. de Surmont is supposed to perform in favor of our finances only increase my astonishment." At this time—since no proofs had yet been laid before the Chancellor—he would content himself with pointing out the contradictions within the reports, as if contradictions had ever disturbed the devotion of a charlatan's followers. Wherever Kaunitz said "practical," the infatuated Cobenzl said "marvelous"; they could not understand each other. "I am not convinced, but I should like to be," wrote Kaunitz once more, in a tone of light irony, but with the restraining addition: "But the character of the strange man, which is more calculated to delude than to convince men, does not inspire confidence in me." His questions about the riches of the Count became more pressing: "What certainty do you have on this point? Of what sort are these riches? Do they consist in gold, securities, landed estates, commercial papers? Here is much darkness to be dispelled before we can see clearly . . ." In the meantime the proofs of the Count's productions arrived at Vienna, accompanied by an apology from the Minister, apparently a trifle shaken in his ardor: "The matter has not turned out quite so splendidly as I had thought . . ." When examined, they proved utterly worthless, and the Chancellor wrote back:

The conceptions you continue to entertain with regard to the supposed secrets of your adept seem to rise to a high point of enthusiasm. It passes my comprehension . . . Your woods and

metals are only wretched substances—pardon the expression, my dear Count! . . . What certainty have you that you can cover even the original investment, the administrative and running expenses? . . . As I picture your adventurer, I am forced to believe that he will succeed in imposing upon you in some way even upon this point. How, then, Monsieur the Count? If someone possessed a fortune of a million and a half and such marvelous secrets, should not he himself turn them to account instead of delivering his treasures to you out of pure friendship? . . . Instead, his secrets will cost you dear, so Your Excellency now says yourself, and yet their exploitation is to be ridiculously cheap.

With impassioned eagerness Kaunitz again attempted to open the eyes of Cobenzl by showing up contradictions. As a thinking man, it seemed impossible to him that the dupe could believe a contradiction as two separate truths.

Gradually, the answers from Brussels became more bashful, and at times reveal unconsciously the methods employed to entrap the Minister: "The more we had to do with him, the more clearly we saw that his rare gifts went together with a most extreme stubbornness, and that he met our wishes only when we suited his own, and that there is no other way to wring his secrets from him than to agree to erect a factory . . ." And he incloses a copy of a contract by which the Count agreed to take a half share for life in the factories to be set up in Tournai by Cobenzl and Madame Nettine. Pushed into a corner, Cobenzl himself rushed into the most foolhardy plans: "I now perceive that he only relinquished his secrets to me because he was in great need and could not himself turn them to use. . . . If this undertaking were connected with a lotto and lottery, it would soon be seen, let us hope, that these three undertakings together would form a considerable source of income for the state finances. . . ."

But now it was too much for Kaunitz. Sternly answering the letter from Brussels with its "irritating details," he reproached his Minister: "But your constant answer to my warnings was: 'What do we care about his faults, if we can only obtain his secrets!'" The Chancellor measured faults by so strict a moral rule that he was prepared to dispense with any advantages



such a scamp might present. Finally Kaunitz let the statistics speak, the figures which are always shunned by charlatans and their followers, who dislike such unpleasant precision:

How is it possible that you could advance 81,720 gulden to this wretch merely for his fine eyes? How could you look on, for your part, and see how he wasted 12,280 gulden merely for traveling about and his board? And apart from all that, how could anyone agree to an expenditure of 99,935 gulden, before a penny's worth of running capital or raw material had been procured for your factories, yes, even without having learned the secrets from the impostor? . . . And yet, after all that I have written to you on this matter, any further observations are pointless.

Now the Empress interfered, informing her brother-in-law, Prince Charles of Lorraine, who had approved of Cobenzl's scheme as Statthalter of the Netherlands, that she would not agree to make good the expenses already contracted, since "it would ruin a great number of my loyal subjects." Saint-Germain departed, and left behind him, as a pawn—it seems a fine bit of cynicism—his secrets. The nephew of Cobenzl, Count Philipp Cobenzl, mentions the matter in his *Erinnerungen*, observing: "He spoke little and in such a manner that one guessed rather than understood. Through this kind of mountebankery, the clever man understood how to attract the confidence of my uncle." This is the same technique of mystery employed by that adventurer in another matter when he added as one point in a list of his processes: "Production of other useful things, upon which I am silent." Or: "On a further point nothing can be said here for various reasons. It remains reserved."

The most striking figure in this intimate comedy of charlatanry is that of Maria Theresa. Her stature may be measured by comparing the scene with another in which her powerful antagonist, Frederick the Great, encountered the temptation of alchemy. This incident in the year 1753 antedates Saint-Germain's appearance at Brussels by exactly ten years. The King was wholly unwilling at first to accept the woman alchemist, Nothnagel, who had been sent to him. In the style which was peculiar to him, he wrote to his factotum, Fredersdorf: "This person deceives herself or wishes to cheat us. Impossible

things cannot be made possible." Nevertheless, he allowed the woman to come to him in man's clothing, to avoid attracting notice. La Nothnagel succeeded more and more in interesting Frederick, and he had her gold sent to the mint to be tested: "So nobody can peek at our cards!" he wrote to Fredersdorf, and in the very next letter: "What you tell me about the woman gives me real hope." Trembling with the tension, he awaited the judgment of the mint. How could it come to pass that this friend of Voltaire should suddenly hold the "impossible" to be possible? He says himself that in the meantime "stormy aspects appear"; a war of aggression by England and Russia threatened Prussia. With a handwriting shaken by excitement he calculates to Fredersdorf that to increase the army by 17,000 men would cost 1,154,000 thalers; he hopes to obtain this sum from the crucibles of La Nothnagel. He signed the contract she laid before him, finding "the conditions very fair." A few months later the King was completely cured and wrote: "I have been much ashamed of myself and have driven all that clowning out of my head." And thus, when Saint-Germain arrived in Prussia, he found the King unwilling to sink into another such trap. One can say, therefore, that the Great Frederick lost his head in one moment of excitement, and may be satisfied with this explanation.

But was it not also a moment of excitement and emergency in which Empress Maria Theresa withstood the temptation to win riches for her country? In 1763 the terrible Seven Years' War was brought to a close, and Silesia had been torn from Austria—one knows what tears the Empress shed over that loss. Austria's political and economic situation was the most precarious imaginable, and the state finances were in dire need of rejuvenation through some fountain of youth. Yet Maria Theresa never hesitated but turned with decision even against the Prince of Lorraine, whom she protected on other occasions as the brother of her beloved husband. Even in the hour of need she did not give rein to her wishes; since she never sought the "impossible," she was not tempted for one moment in her life to believe it was possible merely because she wished it so. With her whole heart she was a Catholic and an Austrian. Her faith and her land kept her true to the "rules of prudence," in which her Chancellor believed; she had that feeling for moderation, that



modesty nurtured by sorrow that declines all excesses ; she kept to the difficult middle ground. Only those who make their stand in that position are armed against the temptations of the charlatan.

## The Charlatan as Dramaturge and Child of Nature

UNDER the influence of Rousseau, the taste for nature and natural scenery became more general in the eighteenth century. The new interest, which brought profound alterations in the emotional and mental life of Europeans, was reflected in the growing vogue of tours to Switzerland. The beauty of mountain scenery had been discovered at last, after so many centuries dominated by the ideals of the ancients, who had been charmed only by the sea and the cultivated plain. Now letters, journals, and travel descriptions were filled with rapturous impressions of the Alps. There fitted into this picture the startling popularity accorded to a child of nature, Michael Schüppach; he was a "mountain doctor," working cures against a fashionably rugged background.

Schüppach, also called the "Schäreremicheli," profited from the widespread superstitious belief in the extraordinary properties of magnetic currents as much as from the enthusiasm for nature of the Rousseau disciples. That he was a "mountain doctor" of course touched the hearts of those elegant ladies and gentlemen who undertook such arduous journeys to gaze with romantic awe at precipices and ravines. The atmosphere of the age was favorable to all sorts of nature cures, and to the development of a new kind of imposture: a falsification of Nature through overemphasis on the natural. Once established as a local curiosity, of course, Schüppach could attract as splendid a clientele of touring aristocrats and *beaux-esprits* as his more illustrious and widely traveled contemporary, Saint-Germain, without ever leaving his village home in Langnau, in the cheese-producing valley of Emmenthal. He had to be consulted, just as one had to have viewed the Jungfrau or Rigi. His uncouth, homely words were plucked by tourists as carefully and proudly as though they were Alpine flowers.

This child of nature among charlatans was born in the canton of Bern in 1707, and showed in early youth a taste for medicine and the natural sciences. His parents, who could not pay for



costly university study, apprenticed him to a village physician. He tested prescriptions in herb books, took a great interest in dissection, and, as soon as he began to earn money, bought anatomical works. Very early he began to write down exact case histories of his patients. Schüppach at first showed great earnestness in his studies, and it would seem that he only gradually, and as a result of his success, began to turn into a charlatan. Often the charlatan type proceeds with little conscious plan and purpose, and may be decisively influenced by a triumph; if, in his scornful eyes, the masses appear womanishly easy to influence, he is apt to react in a womanish way to their adoration. Thus, it is related of Saint-Germain that "in the beginning he only exaggerated a little." His daring increased "as he saw that everything was received with admiration." So, too, the mountain doctor, Schüppach, let his successes go to his head as years passed and his fame, nourished by legends, was spread over Europe; he was seduced into fraudulent tricks, among which his "absent treatments" must be counted.

During the peak of Michael's renown there came to him daily, from the most various regions, eighty and more messengers bringing flasks of urine for him to examine. In all his portraits (as in Fig. 45) Schüppach is shown with a urinal before him, since his great specialty was diagnosis on the basis of such an examination, without having seen the patients. As he did, however, insist that patients in distant towns should write him exactly what their symptoms were, it was not too difficult for him to judge their probable complaints. Such "absent treatments" were far from uncommon at the time. De la Fontaine tells of a peasant doctor in the neighborhood of Cracow who attracted throngs of sufferers; unlike the Swiss, he despised the inspection of urine, but demanded to be sent the shirt of the sick person. "This he smelt very thoughtfully and then gave his oracular opinion. For this consultation and the drugs then prescribed, he was paid 12 Polish gulden; and then he packed off the messengers of the sick with their smelled-over dirty linen."

Critics who observed Schüppach maintained that whenever patients came in person to consult him, he kept one eye on them while he squinted at the urinal in which he read his diagnosis. Eighty to a hundred such patients a day crowded into his small pharmacy. The medicines he gave them had the most various

names: Oil of Joy, Little Flower's Heart, Against the Monster, the Stronger Is Master, Maria Theresa, King of Prussia, and so forth. This nomenclature was unquestionably Schüppach's greatest achievement from the standpoint of propaganda; it satisfied the many who suffered from feelings of inferiority in



*Michel Schüppach*  
*Médecin-Praticien très renommé*  
*à Langnau dans le Canton de Berne.*

45. *Michael Schüppach (1707-81), the Swiss "Mountain Doctor," whose fame attracted many eminent visitors to his home at Langnau in Emmenthal.*

the face of scientific experts. Few of his patients understood Latin and he, the son of poor parents who could not afford to give him a higher education, may often have felt bitter when he heard the unintelligible Latin expressions of his academic colleagues. Now he created names that these could not understand. The Mountain Doctor was jovial; his good humor endeared him as much as the fact that he made well-to-do patients wait just as long as the poor. Many reports circulated about his unusual methods of treatment. One rich peasant, who insisted



that he was possessed of seven devils, was healed by Schüppach in an ingenious manner: he gave the sufferer strong electric shocks, pretending that he could see the devils hastening from the sick body. Another peasant, who imagined that he had swallowed a hay wagon, together with the driver, came to Schüppach; the doctor listened carefully and assured the patient that he could, indeed, hear the crack of a whip inside his belly. The peasant was given a purgative and a sedative, and a hay wagon was hastily ordered. Just as the sick man awoke and immediately vomited, the driver started up the hay wagon and drove away



46. *Michael Schüppach making a diagnosis. On the shelves are medicines prepared by the Mountain Doctor and known by strange German names of his own invention.*

*Woodcut after Gottfried Locher.*

with loud snaps of his whip. By his science, Michael declared, he had dislodged the hay wagon from the peasant's interior, no mean feat. According to the description given by the Zürich professor, Leonhard Meister, of the Mountain Doctor's "dove-cote" and his handsome wife and helpmeet, it seems that theatrical attractions were not lacking: "One stands or sits in company, one plays cards, sometimes with a young woman; now a concert is given, now a lunch or supper, and now a little ballet is presented. With a very happy effect, the freedom of nature is everywhere united with the pleasures of the beau monde, and if the



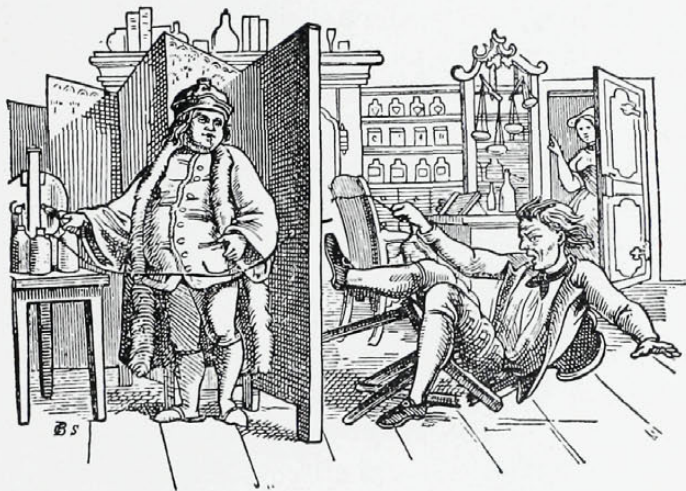
doctor is not able to heal any diseases, he can at least cure hypochondria and the vapors."

When Schüppach died in 1781, rich in honors, mourned by his charmed visitors and apostrophized in enthusiastic verses by Lavater, it was found that he had left 170,000 francs besides various estates with cattle and rich land. In the guest book at Langnau the names of famous savants were inscribed besides those of princesses. That of Cardinal Rohan was not missing. In 1779 Goethe had come. He found Michael in ill humor because he had eaten honey which disagreed with him. Notwithstanding, he seems to have made a certain impression on Goethe, who was as astonished as all the visitors at his monstrous obesity, his "grosseur monstrueuse." In a letter to Frau von Stein, written in October, 1779, Goethe reported: "Yet his eye showed the keenest presence of mind that I believe I have ever seen. Blue, open, protruding, observing without strain . . ." The secret of Schüppach's popularity is made clear in a verse current among the people which compared him with the great scholar and physician Tissot. It ran: "Tissot écrit, Schüppach guérit" (Tissot writes, Schüppach cures).

Earthy mountain men like Schüppach appeared nearer to nature than the city doctors; and so the ailing elegants of the period gladly sought their advice on the complicated matter of preserving the proper balance between body and soul. At that time, the dualistic relations of body and soul were as fashionable a topic of conversation as the harmonization of the intellect with the impulses of the heart; it was believed that health depended on the delicate balance of the "life machine," a doctrine continually preached by Saint-Germain. As Count Lehndorff, reporting on the visit of that adventurer to Saxony, noted in his diaries, Saint-Germain announced that disease was merely a disturbance in the perfect harmony of the life machine. With his keen intelligence he had recognized the germ of truth in this notion, and also the opportunity it presented of playing on the overwrought nerves of a decadent society. Medicine, as Hufeland said, was one of the first sciences to become chic. The idea that one could and must cure one's own ailments by introspection was attractive to the highly emotional *grand monde*, already so preoccupied with self; to study the finest nuances of one's soul and adjust them perpetually to the needs of the body was



a new and fascinating parlor game. Naturally, the Elixirs of Life, which charlatans had always offered, seemed more important than ever. Saint-Germain understood how to win the hearts of women, so Horace Walpole reported, by making them a gift of his rejuvenation water, refusing payment for it although, he said, it cost much money to make. He did not indeed promise that his elixir would make them younger and fairer—modestly, he disclaimed this power—but he did announce that he could



47. *The Mountain Doctor, Michael Schüppach (1707–81), healing a peasant by electric shocks.*

*After a drawing in "Helvetia," a Swiss popular calendar for 1852, at Zürich.*

preserve their present charms. Such gallant speeches, coming from so agreeable a person, made many conquests. But it was not only fair women who were easily captivated by rejuvenation waters; old and gouty lords proved quite as susceptible. A Berlin newspaper report of 1779 declares:

In London a chemist not long ago wrote at great length about a universal panacea which he pretended to have discovered, and handed this writing, under seal, to the Upper House of Parliament. The young lords were unanimously of the opinion that this matter should be referred to the House of Commons, and that they should only permit themselves to hear a report on the subject; but the older lords were of the opinion that so important a discovery was

well deserving of their attention, and that it would be worth considerable trouble, if one could thereby manage to live to the age of one hundred and fifty years.

An amusing French burlesque on the nature fakery of the charlatans is to be found in a popular engraving dating from the end of the eighteenth century (Fig. 48). "Le Gros Thomas," a humbug of the period, is shown in the act of drawing a tooth from a tiger, which has been roaming the wild woods of Fontainebleau; the factotum, Jocrist, is trimming the beast's claws. Obviously the great Thomas cannot only use the healing powers of nature but can tame nature herself. There is little doubt that the artist, picturing the amazement of a public drawn from the lower classes, is really satirizing the modish caprices of a high society not represented in the drawing. Nature is symbolized by a butterfly on Thomas' hat and the dragonfly adorning a drug cabinet. A light ironic laugh is raised at the expense of the nature worshipers by the pose of the tamed tiger: it leans back so luxuriously, supported by the arms of the velvet *fauteuil*, and allows Big Thomas to prop open its jaws.

*Laissez faire à la Nature* was the general philosophy of the eighteenth century, reflected in all spheres, the medical as well as the aesthetic and economic. But while the Enlightenment movement was based upon a return to Nature, this idea was accompanied by the revival of some very primitive notions. It led to an overestimation of the wisdom of the savage; in the United States, it resulted in an exaggerated confidence being placed in Indian "vegetable elixirs," peddled frequently by Negroes, because both the Redskin and the Negro appeared to stand close to elemental forces and secrets. The faith in herbal remedies was exploited to the full by Samuel Thomson, born on a New Hampshire farm in 1769, who had no schooling himself and was never weary of denouncing "book doctors"; all ailments could be cured by vegetable compounds, he declared, offering to sell the right to make his medicines to anyone for \$20. His "Friendly Botanic Societies" soon sprang up in all parts of New England. Eventually it was realized that "in almost every village and hamlet patients died under the Thomsonian treatment" and Thomson was indicted for murder. He was set free but the Botanic Societies quickly withered away.





48. Le Gros Thomas, a popular French charlatan, pulls a tiger's tooth;  
Jocrist, his servant, is trimming the beast's claws.

Popular French print from the end of the eighteenth century.

Another symptom of the trend back to Nature was the renewal of faith in healing by the "laying on of hands," while pronouncing certain mystic phrases. This notion, extremely ancient, received a new sanction through the vogue of mesmerism; Mesmer's demonstrations of hypnotic cures seemed to bring the supernatural under natural law. To some extent this may have accounted for the enormous sales of *Pow Wows, or, the Long Lost Friend* (1819). This work with its Indian title, giving herbal remedies and occult formulas derived from a thirteenth-century treatise attributed to Albertus Magnus, helped to revivify medieval magic in the United States. But the formulas were efficacious only when both practitioner and patient believed in prayer, conditions not so easily filled in America as in Germany, according to the author, John George Hohman, because "there are many in America who believe neither in a hell nor in a heaven; but in Germany there are not so many of these persons found."

In Germany, the strong faith in formulas alluded to by the compiler of *Pow Wows* produced a remarkable figure, a performer of miracles who is nowadays forgotten but once was held in the highest esteem. When the Polish court physician, De la Fontaine, wanted to emphasize the popularity of the shirt-smelling wonder worker of Cracow, he wrote: "On account of the novelty of this kind of diagnosis, he attracted crowds no smaller than those formerly lured by the good-humored whimsical Michael Schüppach in Langnau, or the coarse, lugubrious Moon Doctor in Berlin." Who was this moon doctor?

His name was Weisleder and he was originally a stocking weaver before he hit upon the novel method of treatment that made him a celebrity in the enlightened Prussian capital in the year 1780. The afflicted portions of the patient's body were uncovered and exposed to the rays of the moon, which had to be in its first increscent quarter; then he touched the ailing parts with his hand, meanwhile turning his own face toward the moon and muttering some unintelligible words. In April, 1783, the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* published an article by the municipal doctor, Pyl, who had attempted to probe the methods of his more famous colleague, but with scant success:



I have been able to examine only a few cases, on account of the astonishing stubbornness and enthusiasm of the people, which made me fear abuse and ill treatment. The enthusiasm of even sensible persons for this man goes so far that they let themselves be deceived by appearances and cannot suffer anyone to rob them of their error. Most of them also refuse absolutely to undergo an inspection. Several describe the injuries from which they originally suffered as dangerous in the extreme; but upon more searching inquiry they then took back much. Almost all are so stubborn that they simply will not declare what doctor or surgeon they had consulted before.

What is most striking here is the fact that it was the devotees themselves who, out of the urge to justify their surrender, produced the legends that confirmed the fame of the swindler.

"He who has opinions is not above doubt," said St. Thomas Aquinas. If the opinionated person belongs to the ranks of the quack's predisposed victims, he will sublimate his doubts by magnifying the person or the occurrence about which he is dubious. In order that *he* may not be in the wrong, the charlatan must be in the right. To silence his own conscience, he will refuse to swallow the insinuations of the skeptics; he cannot endure anyone to "rob him of his error," and to soothe himself invents stories which attract ever new throngs of followers to the impostor. Such men of weak will and troubled conscience are the heralds of the charlatan.

From a letter signed "D. H.," sent to the enlightened foe of superstition, Biester, editor of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, who published it under the title of *The Pilgrimage to the Moon Doctor in Berlin*, we receive a lively account of this splendid charlatan *régisseur*. "Could I remember enough of the moon doctor scene, of which I was an eyewitness to communicate to you? You ask, my dear Biester—if I could!" So begins the epistle, which goes on to sketch not only the moon doctor but the whole hysterical self-deception of that "enlightened" time; suddenly awakened from the "sweet fancy" in which his mind was lulled, by this "tumultuous hullabaloo," the author rubbed his eyes and asked himself: "When one sees a crowd of close to a thousand persons being trampled underfoot; when one sees the

whole nobility of mankind . . . shamelessly dishonored with eager enthusiasm and at the expense of life and health; when one sees all this in Berlin, said to be the main seat of wisdom, of common sense, of good taste, of toleration, and of the highest degree of culture"—what is one to make of it all?

"This miraculous fellow . . . demands nothing except what patients were forced to give voluntarily for their entrance tickets at every visit, and afterwards voluntarily wanted to give his wife . . . He had been carrying on his antics for many years in his suburban inn, with much success, but no one in the capital knew anything definite about it; and what one did hear had no influence." At last, however, the Moon Doctor succeeded in curing a well-to-do woman of Berlin, and from that point his ascent was rapid:

The rumor spread from house to house, from street to street, from class to class, and what gave it the swiftest wings and strongest effect was the fact that stories were universally told about great folk who visited him or had him come to them, to restore their sight, hearing, or entire health. . . . A foolish or stupid thing is rarely seen in full splendor upon a stage unless it is announced by a herald with orders and medals. The testimonials of the mountebank never consist in anything but letters of lords, marquises, or counts whom he has cured.

Begged by his friends to accompany a deaf person to the Moon Doctor, the letter writer agreed:

We went to the Kommandantenstrasse and took up our position at the corner of the Jakobstrasse, that led to the temple of Aesculapius, in order to observe with amazement the throng of miserable folk who streamed there from all side streets. Almost the whole neighborhood was swarming with the blind and the lame, who, with an eagerness and confidence that could be read in their faces, were pressing on or being led into the Jakobstrasse. One might have thought that the whole region was one great hospital yard, so surrounded was one by cripples. This urge to be cured was carried even to the point of vanity. We saw among a group of lame patients one person who also pressed eagerly forward, in whose physical frame we could detect not the slightest irregularity, except that the right foot was very slightly turned inwards. The man is



right, said one of us, he wants to get rid even of this precious little deformity; *he can have his wish!* From there we proceeded to the temple itself, a wretched beerhouse of the lowest class that consisted of a long entrance hall, a spacious courtyard and garden, and a big taproom. Every corner was filled with persons having obvious or concealed mutilations, with persons of all ages and both sexes, all religions, and all conditions. They were all packed together, discussing the rumored cures of the moon priest and their own cures, every one of them with a warmth that at times went to my heart and at times wrung an involuntary smile from me that I endeavored to repress by force. I had to bite my lips hard; an open laugh might have cost me my life. Everyone attended the arrival of the priest, who was more than usually tardy today, with a painful impatience like that of souls tortured by conscience, awaiting the moment of their delivery. At last a general murmur spread that nothing would happen before nine o'clock, because the Herr Moon Doctor had been fetched not an hour before in a six-horse carriage to see the Princess —— and from there he had to go on to Prince ——.

The deaf patient had to leave before nine and could not repeat his visit until the following month, when the moon was again in the right phase:

We came in the afternoon about five o'clock to the Jakobstrasse, which we found full of the most magnificent equipages, among which we had much difficulty in making our way. In the house itself, the hall and court and taproom were filled with an astounding crowd of people, who were packed together far more closely than at the first performance of Hamlet that Brokmann gave [in Berlin]. I counted several hundreds. When one remembers that there was a constant going and coming of invalids, and that the operations lasted every time from four in the afternoon until midnight, and each individual cure lasted one minute, one must reckon that at least five hundred, yes, a thousand, must have found their way here every day; a monstrous number of the infirm but probably a far more monstrous number of fools in proportion to the population of our city! . . . This was no gathering of the lowest rabble . . . but hardly any save rich and well-dressed gentlemen and ladies in splendid toilettes, almost none but folk whose clothes and bearing betrayed high rank and quality.

As we came in the door, we found it hardly possible at first to take a few steps into the room on account of the enormous crowd. We saw whole groups leaving, some because they had already undergone the cure, others with their business undone because they could not get through; but just as great numbers were constantly pushing in afresh. . . . At one end of the room was a stairway which led up to the second story, the real seat of the divinity; upon this a soldier stood guard, who let up only twelve at a time (patients afflicted with the same ailment). Just at this moment the sentinel shouted: "Are all the ruptures through? Up with the deaf!" I raised myself a-tiptoe and held up in his face an eight-groschen piece. "Ha, ha," he shouted, "have you a rupture? Make way there!" And so the deaf friend, whom the letter writer had to accompany, came in as the first of the new batch.

In the upper story were two rooms; the windows of one opened to the south, those of the other to the north. The doors of the latter opening by chance, I saw innumerable ladies, who were gathered here to receive treatment from the Frau Doktorin, to whom her husband had imparted his miraculous power. Before the other door stood a young woman with a handful of tickets, which one had to purchase in order to be admitted. To the question: what was to pay? she answered: what you please, but less than two groschen will not be accepted. . . . As we came in, I found an empty, dirty, low-ceilinged room like that of a common artisan. I saw a long lean man, well advanced in years, with sparse hair, clad in a coarse blue garment, who was walking to and fro in the room with a tobacco pipe. And that was the doctor himself. . . . Now he laid down the pipe: "Let us go to work," said he, "it grows late. . . ." Thereupon he called to him a very handsome boy of about four years, who was brought by his father, a young man who, to judge by his appearance, was well-to-do and sensible. He placed the boy at his left side by the window, opened his trousers, took down the truss, laid his left hand upon the injured spot, all the time appearing to gape at the moon, which in fact was not visible at all, and murmured some words. Thereupon he folded both hands and held them up to the moon, again spoke a few soft words, and that was the end of it all. He set down the boy, the father took him aside and restored the truss; and I listened, really with a kind of painful melancholy, as this sedate man asked the child: "How is it, my son,



does it hurt so much as it did?" "O yes, papa!" the child replied.

After all, the visibility of the moon during the cure cannot have been necessary, since the *Frau Doktorin* was curing people at the same time, with the same moon, through a window on the opposite side. . . . One thing more I must tell you. The man had also his regularly appointed spies. While I was in the room during the operation, a man in servant's livery who stood by the door (and, as I afterwards heard, was the proprietor of the inn, who drew no small income from this imposture) said to his neighbor in a rather loud voice: "Yes, in sooth, anyone who comes here to annoy our Master, won't get away with it, that I can assure you; and there is said to be such a one in the group, a doctor, but let him beware!" I must confess my heart began to beat, for I was convinced that, if I betrayed myself by the smallest gesture, I should quite certainly have had to make my exit through the window.

This report conveys impressively the atmosphere created by the quack to work up the feelings of the crowd. His sure instinct for dramatic effect is shown by the way in which he caused these people, already overwrought with hope, to wait a long time, shut up together by design, until this close physical contact had its effect and they spread the germs of this contagious fever unavoidably to one another; then he cast a crumb of comfort to this crowd, when it had reached the highest pitch of expectation, by the report of visits to princes and princesses, thus adding a fresh halo to his person. That the moon can shine only upon one side of a house is a fact easily ignored by a crowd so skilfully worked upon; such an observation would be repudiated at once as the sneer of an envious foe. North and south are no longer opposites where the *Moon Doctor* reigns. How the threatening voice of obstinate brute intolerance speaks through this report! The air is charged with forces inimical to good sense and clarity: behind the doors of the packed taproom reigns a temper that may easily become homicidal.

The poverty of the milieu in which the *Moon Doctor* operated afforded a new sensation to the same society groups which other charlatans baited with the most luxurious refinements. To reduce the fashionable world to humble admiration, one must offer extremes. Luxury combined with the occult was the secret of a

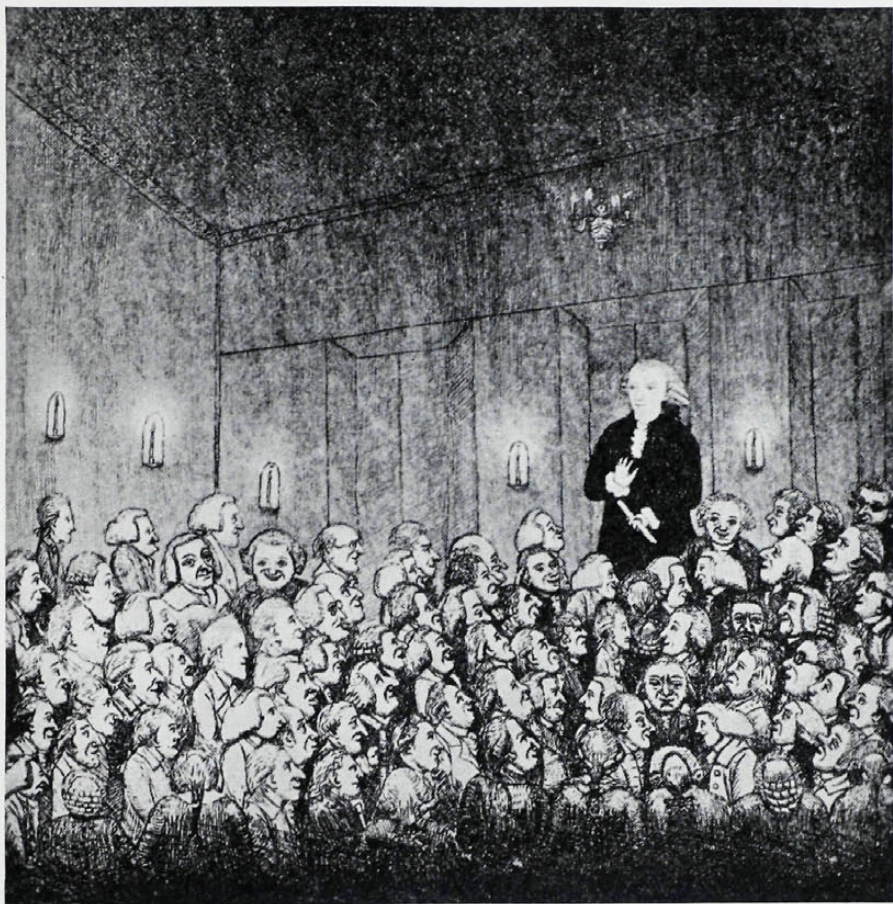


Scottish quack, James Graham, who was winning a large following and great riches in London at exactly the same period that the Moon Doctor was operating in Berlin, that is, around the year 1780. While the Germans were captivated by a simple though spiritual gesture toward the moon, a more elaborate ritual was employed by Graham; he maintained a show of great scientific technique. In 1772, just before the American Revolution, he had visited Philadelphia, where he met Benjamin Franklin and became interested in the latter's experiments with electricity. These appear to have inspired the apparatus in the "Temple of Health," the fabulous establishment he opened in London for the sale of his elixirs and "Nervous Aetherical Balsam." In the chief room, where he received patients, stood "the largest air pump in the world" to assist him in his "philosophical investigations" into disease, and also a "stupendous metallic conductor," a richly gilded pedestal surrounded with retorts and vials of "etherial and other essences." Perhaps American efficiency had also appealed to him; beside the throne on which he sat was a glass tube leading to the pharmacy below: he dropped the prescription into the tube and, in the twinkling of an eye, a trapdoor opened, disclosing the drugs.

According to J. Ennemoser, who published a history of magic in 1844 at Leipzig, Graham's "house . . . united the useful with the pleasurable. Everywhere the utmost magnificence was displayed. Even in the outer court, averred an eyewitness, it seemed as though art, invention, and riches had been exhausted. On the side walls in the chambers an arc-shaped glow was provided by artificial electric light (see Fig. 49); star rays darted forth; transparent glasses of all colors were placed with clever selection and much taste. All this, the same eyewitness assures us, was ravishing and exalted the imagination to the highest degree." Visitors were given a printed sheet of rules for healthy living. In the Great Apollo Apartment they might join in mysterious rituals, accompanied by chants: "Hail, Vital Air, aethereal! Magnetic Magic, hail!" And while they hailed the magic of magnetism, the windows were darkened, revealing a ceiling studded with electric stars and a young and lovely "Rosy Goddess of Health" in a niche. Thus the "scientific" was made warm and attractive by the arts of the stage manager, the priest, and the parlor magician.



Every evening this Temple of Health was crowded with guests; it had become the fashion to visit it and try the great twelve-foot bed of state, the "Grand Celestial Bed," said to



49. *The Scotch charlatan, James Graham (1745-94), lecturing to his followers in the "Great Apollo Apartment," the main hall in his marvelous London establishment.*

*After a contemporary sketch by John Kay.*

cure any disease and also to assist wonderfully in "the propagating of Beings rational, all far stronger and more beautiful in mental as well as in bodily endowments, than the present puny, feeble, and nonsensical race of probationary mortals, which crawl and fret, and politely play at cutting one another's throats for nothing at all, on most parts of this terraqueous globe."



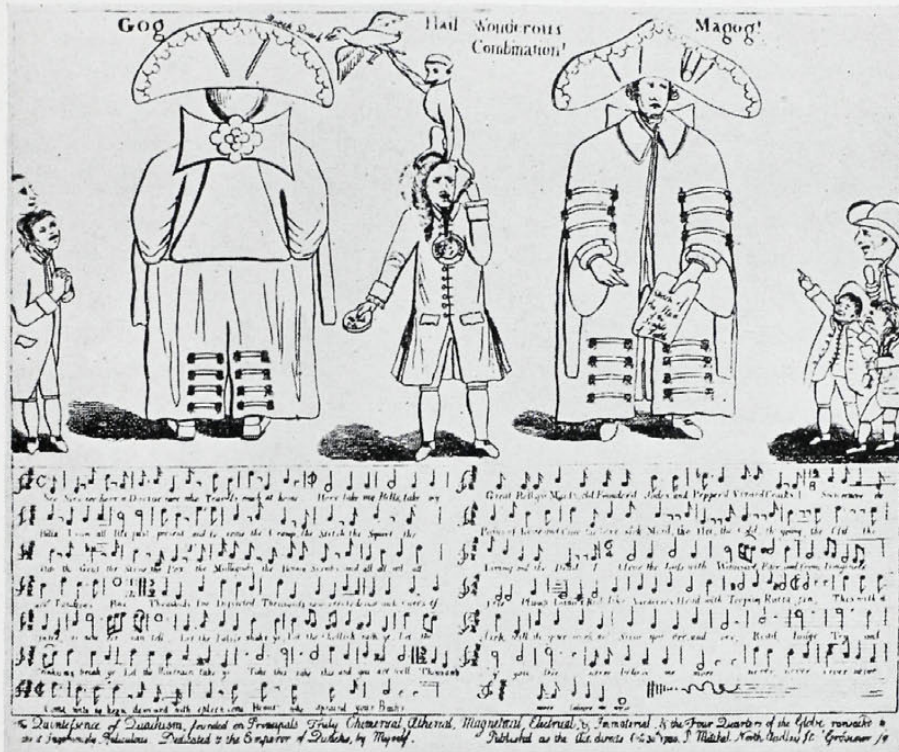
This bed, according to Ennemoser, "stood in a splendid room, into which a cylinder led from an adjoining chamber to conduct the healing currents . . . at the same time all sorts of pleasing scents of strengthening herbs and Oriental incense were also brought in through glass tubes. The heavenly bed itself rested upon six solid transparent pillars; the bedclothes were of purple and sky-blue Atlas silk, spread over a mattress saturated with Arabian perfumed waters to suit the tastes of the Persian court. The chamber in which it was placed he called the *Sanctum Sanctorum*.

"He would not show the bed to anyone who had seen all the rest; for, said he, who could then bear the delight and rapture which this enchanted spot conjured up? To add to all this, there were the melodious notes of the harmonica, soft flutes, agreeable voices, and a great organ. He said with reason that nothing restored their strength to overstrained nerves with more astonishing ease than this heavenly bed."

This "Emperor of Quacks" who so clearly aimed at meeting the refined tastes of the elegant world was also the discoverer of earth baths, which were supposed to enable a man to lead a long and healthy life without eating. Immersed in freshly dug-up sand or earth, the pores of the skin were to suck in the nourishing juices of the soil. The practical application of this discovery, as proposed by Graham, lay in the military field: soldiers in beleaguered garrisons or fortresses would be able, with the aid of these baths, to withstand hunger for many months. In this century, inventors were eager to help humanity, rather than the mere individual, because they understood that the state is a better paying customer than the solitary man, either for earth baths or for secret industrial processes. A cartoon (Fig. 50) represents James Graham standing between the giants, Gog and Magog, by whom were meant the two doormen who stood before the Temple of Health and distributed his quack bills. The duck in the cartoon, which the monkey holds by the leg, is crying "Quack, quack!" Graham, holding a box of his "Aetherical Pills," carries the monkey on his shoulder, reminding us of Dante's simile of the ape and Tenier's drawing of the ape alchemist (Fig. 9). Children are pointing and laughing at the charlatan, and beneath the picture are the verses and notes of a satirical ditty.



If Schüppach, Graham, and the Moon Doctor were local curiosities who attained more or less extensive renown, one might call the “Chevalier” John Taylor a road agent of charlatanry. Nobody else understood quite so well how to make the best use of the coach, although it had long been the quack’s chosen con-



50. *Satirical picture with verses about James Graham, his "Aetherical Pills," and the tall doormen who guarded his "Temple of Health."*

veyance. Taylor's was drawn by four white horses, and was adorned with testimonials and pictures of eyeballs. Visible from afar, a huge placard hung in front bearing the motto: "Qui visum dat, dat vitam" (Who gives eyesight, gives life). Chevalier Taylor, an Englishman (1708–72), was the most imposing swindler among the many who practiced as oculists. He prosecuted his studies in Basle, where he took his degree and was received into the college of doctors, and also in Paris. His tours, on which he operated for cataract, led him not merely over all of Europe but also to Persia and Asia Minor. Like Eisenbarth,



he sought to impress through numerous titles, which he had announced as soon as he entered a town. He called himself: "The Chevalier John Taylor, Ophthalmiator, Pontifical, Imperial, and Royal, who treated Pope Benedict XIV, Augustus III, King of Poland, Frederick V, King of Denmark and Norway, and Frederick Adolphus, King of Sweden." He was a dangerous fellow and many persons were blinded by his hand. After the cataract was "couched," he immediately bound bandages around the patient, directing him to keep them on three or four days. When the victim removed the covering and discovered his misfortune, Taylor was already far away in his coach. The Grand Duke of Mecklenburg had an unhappy experience in this line in 1751, and the resultant shift of public opinion from hope to indignant disappointment, before and after the visit of the wonder worker, may be read in the newspapers of that region. That men who had been injured in health or purse sometimes tried to wreak vengeance on Taylor is maintained by a report from London, printed by the *Vossische Zeitung* in 1757: "The same man has absconded at night and without a lantern; he has moved everything that he could get out from his lodgings in Suffolk Street, and has moved a good mile away to another dwelling; this, however, he only leaves at night, like the bats, for he distrusts the police anglers who lie in wait for him. He has been fond of running up debts and through his charlatanry has made more than ten thousand persons blind in England . . ."

None of the victims was able to reach him. He continued his triumphal tours and gave lectures at English universities, rousing admiration by his fine bearing and costume, which are indicated in his portrait (Fig. 51). The features of the elegant gentleman betray an uncommon degree of coldness, conceit, and lack of scruple. He was the court oculist of George II and, whenever he made his entry in a new town, used to pass around handbills with pictures and testimonials of the great. Next he visited the well-known physicians of the vicinity as well as persons of quality, inviting them to a meeting at which he delivered a bragging speech in the form of a scientific discourse and allowed them to admire his operating instruments, which were inlaid with gold and silver. Only after this spectacle did the operations begin. For his lectures, he clad himself in a black robe and a



long white wig. He climbed the platform and stood behind a large table upon which a piece of old tapestry was spread. Four tall candles lighted the speaker, and before him stood a carafe of water and a glass. His speeches were excellent samples of that



51. John Taylor (1708-72). This charlatan, known as "Chevalier Taylor," made many persons blind by his unscrupulous practices.

verbosity which is the charlatan's stock in trade. He loved plays on words as much as Magno-Cavallo, and used to transpose words from their natural sequence in order to attract more attention; thus, he would say, "The eye, on the wonders lecture will I."

His speeches were all carefully memorized. A typical selection is the beginning of a lecture which he delivered at the University of Oxford, called "The Eye." It ran:

The eye, most illustrious sons of the muses, most learned Oxonians whose fame I have heard celebrated in all parts of the globe—the eye, that most amazing, that stupendous, that comprehending, that incomprehensible, that miraculous organ the eye, is the

Proteus of the passions, the herald of the mind, the interpreter of the heart, and the window of the soul. The eye has dominion over all things. The world was made for the eye, and the eye for the world.

My subject is Light, most illustrious sons of literature—intellectual Light. Ah! my philosophical, metaphysical, my classical, mathematical, mechanical, my theological, my critical audience, my subject is the eye.

You are the Eye of England.

England has two eyes—Oxford and Cambridge. You are the right eye of England, the elder Sister in Science and the first fountain of learning in all Europe.

The eye is the husband of the soul!

The eye is indefatigable. The eye is an angelic faculty. The eye in this respect is a female. The eye is never tired of seeing and enjoying all nature's vigor.

The design of this oration was, obviously enough, not so much to explain the functions of the eye as to court the audience. In the everlasting quarrel between the two universities over priority of foundation, Taylor played up Oxford at Oxford, and, most certainly, praised Cambridge at Cambridge. More adroit than Magno-Cavallo, the Pomeranian rhetorician, he played with his gleaming, senseless phrases, and, through incessant repetition, numbed his auditors' ears. The public accepted the heavy flattery and failed to observe that, in the end, only one person emerged with glory: the charlatan himself. When the Chevalier reached the end of his career and lay at the point of death in a monastery at Prague, he wrote an inscription for his own tombstone, a last chef-d'oeuvre of self-glorification:

Here rest the bones of a man who was the most remarkable of his century, through his abilities in an art that is of the utmost value to the human race, and whose practitioner, nay, whose creator, he seemed destined by Providence to become. His reason illuminated the darkness, his hand reached into the deepest secrets and appeared to be led by that Spirit that created the edifice of the body. . . .



## The "Quack of Quacks"

CAGLIOSTRO was the most renowned of all the charlatans in the eighteenth century. No other was so closely connected with the stirring events of the age, no other stimulated so strongly the minds of representative literary men to criticism, admiration, or poetic expression. Goethe, Schiller, Tieck, and Dumas made him a leading character in various literary productions; he was a genuinely popular figure, occupying the imagination of the best men of his time. Casanova, the adventurer, met him, saw through him, and despised his coarse and plain appearance. But Casanova, *viveur* and gallant, was a wholly eighteenth-century type; he could appreciate better the other great charlatan, Saint-Germain, who also belonged to that period despite the modernity of his views, since he, too, was a cultivated man of the world with aristocratic traits. Cagliostro, by contrast, was all proletarian; even when he took the title of Count he remained a commoner. In him a new era appeared, rumbling and threatening; he represented a rising class of men with whom the old aristocracy would have to fight or come to terms.

Cagliostro was not endowed with those fine perceptions of quality that told a Saint-Germain exactly how much he knew and where pretense began, and permitted him to view his own imposture with such calm insight. Beppo (Giuseppe) Balsamo, alias Count Alexander Cagliostro, was shrewd but wholly uncritical; he often succumbed to his own power of suggestion and at moments was actually inclined to believe what he said himself. Undoubtedly, he had moments of genuine feeling, devoid of calculation; occasionally he fell prey to that medley of impulses and conceptions which we have already discussed in another connection as typical of the Renaissance charlatan. He could be caught off guard in such hours. If he did not always understand his own motives, it is certain that others failed even more completely to understand him. They did not realize that the disquieting attraction that drew them to this coarse Count was, in large part, due to the fact that he embodied the future—he was a precursor of the approaching Revolution.

Cagliostro's variegated career can only be outlined here. He was born in 1743 in Palermo, and led the life of any keen, intelligent, half-depraved street urchin. In the seminary of St. Rochus he learned to read and write and when he ran away from that institution he was received by a monastery, where he was put to doing odd jobs in the pharmacy; from this experience came the medical knowledge of the great wonder doctor. Commissioned to read to the brothers out of a martyrology, while they dined, he substituted for the names of martyrs those of well-known harlots of the town, and was forthwith put out of the monastery. He then turned to painting, in its lowest forms; to him painting, sketching, and counterfeiting were closely allied arts, and he was much sought by those who needed something forged, whether it was a patent, a testament, or merely a theater ticket. He also got himself engaged to dig for treasure, which he pretended had been hidden in ocean caves. In various ways he earned at least enough to eat well, a thing he always enjoyed throughout his life. To spend newly acquired wealth for food and drink points to a proletarian origin. The more gently nurtured charlatans, whose natures were more complex, were less inclined to gluttony. Saint-Germain was exceedingly moderate, and was supposed to have owed to that course the youthful appearance he preserved to a great age; while Beireis, who was very rich, was stingy to the point of miserliness. The collection of valuables, and indeed delight in collecting itself, could have held meaning only for those social strata from which Cagliostro did not come. The similes and comparisons chosen by this charlatan were taken from the realm of his childhood experiences. Biester related in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* for November, 1787, that he had visited Cagliostro, who happened to be living in Biel, in Switzerland; he thought he had never seen such "a gross and common charlatan." "It was particularly striking when he assured us with emphasis: 'pour soulager l'humanité je travaille comme un boeuf.' How completely befitting this simile was can only be judged by one who has seen this monster, his broad shoulders and thick neck, wherein he resembles the Podolian ox."

Continually in trouble with his patrons or the police, Cagliostro, like so many charlatans, was induced to take his first journey to escape arrest. In Messina and Malta he made the



acquaintance of outstanding alchemists who initiated him into their arcana. Later on, Cagliostro reëdited this episode in conformity with contemporary tastes and made out of the hero of Sicilian alleys an unlucky son of the last ruler of Trebizond, who had been driven into exile. Then, the fairy tale continued, he had been reared by a noble sherif who baptized him "unhappy child of nature." Later the unhappy child met the high priest of all esoteric wisdom, Althotas, and became his pupil; but soon the pupil found himself under the necessity of slaying the master, a painful interlude which was only hinted at in the recital. In reality, Cagliostro had been compelled to flee for a second time, after he had forged a colonel's commission. But this time he was accompanied by his wife and talented accomplice, Lorenza Feliciani, daughter of a Roman glovemaker. Lorenza was very beautiful; the devotion of a century that made a cult of beautiful women was soon laid at the feet of the mysterious Countess. Her role in the business of infatuating followers was very great, and had been coolly calculated by her procurer husband. In the pictures of mountebanks, a woman who entices the throng to taste the magic potion is seldom lacking; and so it proved in the sphere of higher charlatanry as well. For the rest, the Count took pleasure in despising the female sex. The Baroness von der Recke, whose memoirs are a valuable source of information on the impostor's ways, explained this misanthropic attitude as an "Artful trick . . . in order to assure himself all the more of the enthusiasm of those particular women whom he counted among the exceptions."

By this time Balsamo was already calling himself Count Cagliostro. With his wife, he managed to make a bare living, even enjoyed some successes, swindled and was again forced to flee; and so the scene shifted between London, Paris, Germany, and Italy. Credulous patrons turned up to save him at his worst moments. As the most versatile of all impostors, Cagliostro was by turns alchemist, forger of documents, prestidigitator, quack-salver, spirit conjurer, and procurer. In these days, while fame still lay ahead and he moved with Lorenza from town to town, the pair acquired consummate knowledge of their métier. After they had shown a materialization of the devil in one city, they entertained the next one with an exhibition of traditional magic art, changing hemp to silk, pebbles to pearls, powder to roses.



They carried with them a mandrake root, locked in a casket lined with satin, and a crystal ball in which one could stare until one saw iridescent pictures: interiors of bedchambers, exotic landscapes, shapes of the past and future.

Their second visit to London brought the great coup. Impudently, Cagliostro pushed his way into the Freemasons' lodges, won followers for himself, and achieved wide renown. Now he became the elegant Count Alexander Cagliostro, attended by couriers and flunkys. Relying like Eisenbarth upon the tested device of a splendid equipage, he rode about in a suave black coach with his own monogram in pale gold, and received the plaudits of the crowd in cities which he was forced to leave by stealth at night and in fog. London, Brussels, The Hague, Courland, lay along his route. He visited Russia and Germany; at Strassburg he met Cardinal Rohan, whom he completely captivated and induced to become a patron. Since the suspicions of the Freemasons had been awakened and grew uncomfortable, he founded a new Egyptian Lodge in Lyons, in 1784, with his own ritual.

The unexampled success which Cagliostro had with his lodge in all parts of Europe is to be explained only in part by the erotic excesses of the nightly assemblies by which he later attracted such throngs in Paris, where Lorenza presided over the meetings of noble ladies. The cult he introduced was crowned by his prescription for attaining immortality of the soul. An expert diagnostician of his time, Cagliostro had the keen insight of a man belonging to a rising stratum of society for the weaknesses of a decaying social class. He had recognized the fact that the modern magician was now besought to give not opiate against ennui nor a path of escape from the world but escape from the grave. The fear of death that lay heavily on that aristocratic generation called for an antidote, an elixir of life for soul and body; and Cagliostro distributed it to the members of his lodge. In one letter from a lodge brother one may see how far the devotion of neophytes to the purveyors of such elixirs may go: "My Master and, next to the Eternal, my All! It appears that the sea opposed the separation to which I was forced . . . But, my Master, I have had the good fortune to see you this night. The Eternal has bestowed the benediction that I



received yesterday. Ah, my Master, next to God you are my bliss . . . ?"

In 1785 Cagliostro entered Paris in triumph. These years in Paris represented the climax of his life and fame, and it was very difficult for him to leave the city finally, after he became involved in the affair of the Queen's necklace. He felt then that everything must be thenceforward a descent. Never again was the atmosphere of Paris to be so favorable to an ambitious Sicilian street boy as it was in that prerevolutionary period. In his study, *The Diamond Necklace*, Thomas Carlyle painted the historical background of events:

Survey first what we call the stage lights, orchestra, general structure of the theatre, mood and condition of the audience. The theatre is the World, with its restless business and madness; near at hand rise the royal Domes of Versailles, mystery around them, and as background the memory of a thousand years. By the side of the River Seine walks, haggard, wasted, a Joaillier-Bijoutier de la Reine, with Necklace in his pocket. The audience is a drunk Christopher Sly in the fittest humour. A fixed-idea, driving him headlong over steep places like that of the Gadarenes' Swine, has produced a deceptibility, as of desperation, that will clutch at straws.

Despairing credulity is a symptom of complete and universal insecurity. This condition was presented on the eve of the Revolution. The foundations of society, as well as those of religion and belief in the eternal life, were profoundly shaken. The various estates were disintegrating; they were on the point of turning into social classes. A new economic and social structure was already visible, and as its lineaments grew clearer, the demand for new rights of man became more stormy. But among those who shut their eyes to reality and clutched at the old scheme of things there began to unroll that curious and involved affair centering around the diamond necklace of Marie Antoinette; this sensational trial brought on the deluge, unjustly so far as the Queen was concerned, but justly with respect to the decadent groups of the old aristocracy. The chief actor in this monster trial was Cardinal Rohan, the man whom Maria Theresa, with her unerring instinct for charlatans and their



dupes, had so hated and despised that she was constantly working to obtain his recall from Vienna. He is pictured by Carlyle as the prototype of the deluded follower:

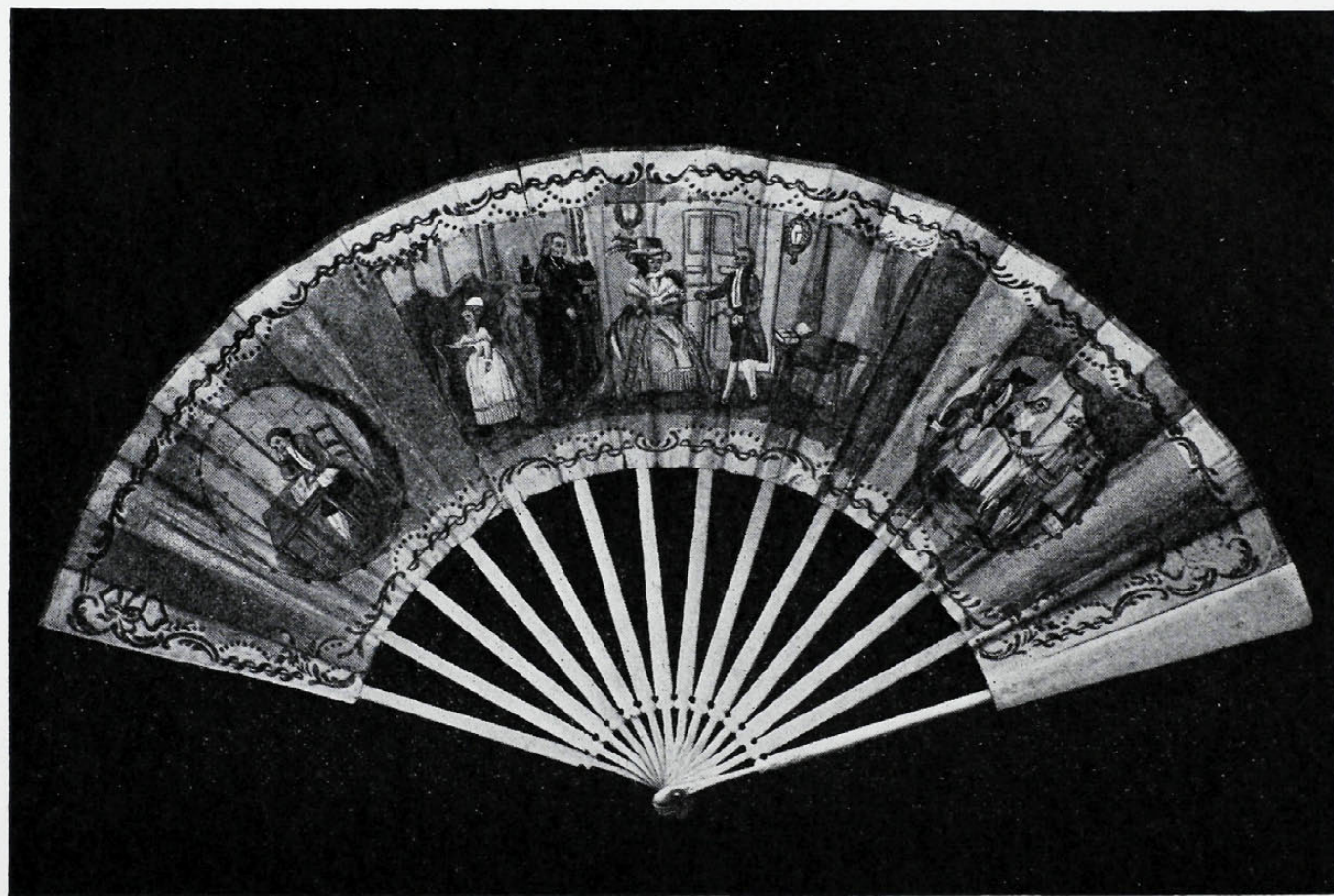
What could poor Rohan perform? Performing needs light, needs strength, and a firm clear footing; all of which had been denied him. . . . Understand one other word; Cagliostro is prophesying to him! The Quack of Quacks has now for years had him in leading. Transmitting "predictions in cipher"; questioning, before Hieroglyphic Screens, Columbs in a state of innocence, for elixirs of life, and philosopher's stone; unveiling, in fuliginous clear-obscure, an imaginary majesty of Nature; he isolates him more and more from all unpossessed men. Was it not enough that poor Rohan had become a dissolute, somnolent-violent, ever-vapory Mud-volcano; but black Egyptian magic must be laid on him!

Cagliostro, who had been drawn into the affair half against his will by the real culprit, the Countess de la Motte, was compelled to await the verdict on his case in a cell in the Bastille. The clemency shown him meant a victory for the enemies of Marie Antoinette, and when he was set free, he was given a procession of triumph. Paris was stirred to the depths; the first tremors of the coming Revolution shook the city, while the nobility, so soon to be destroyed by the catastrophe, still indulged in wasteful intrigues against the hated Austrian. Cagliostro, in his heart, despised the social groups that had fêted him; with shrewd instinct for the approaching events, he turned to dupe the poverty-stricken of Paris. He caused a cripple to run before the hired carriage that took him from the Bastille; the cripple distributed bottles of medicine to the poor. The tens of thousands who exultantly accompanied him and, the next morning, broke into a stormy ovation before the house of the liberated hero, understood this language. But even the nobility remained upon the side of the Sicilian street boy. Lorenza, who had been freed before her husband, had to keep a book in which all visitors could enter their names. "*Il est exactement de bon ton d'avoir passé à l'hôtel de Cagliostro*" wrote a contemporary. Directly after he was set free from the Bastille, however, the Count received an order expelling him from Paris. A crowd of enthusiasts on foot and in carriages accompanied the adventurer to Passy, where he took lodgings. Brenner, a traveling citizen of Basle,



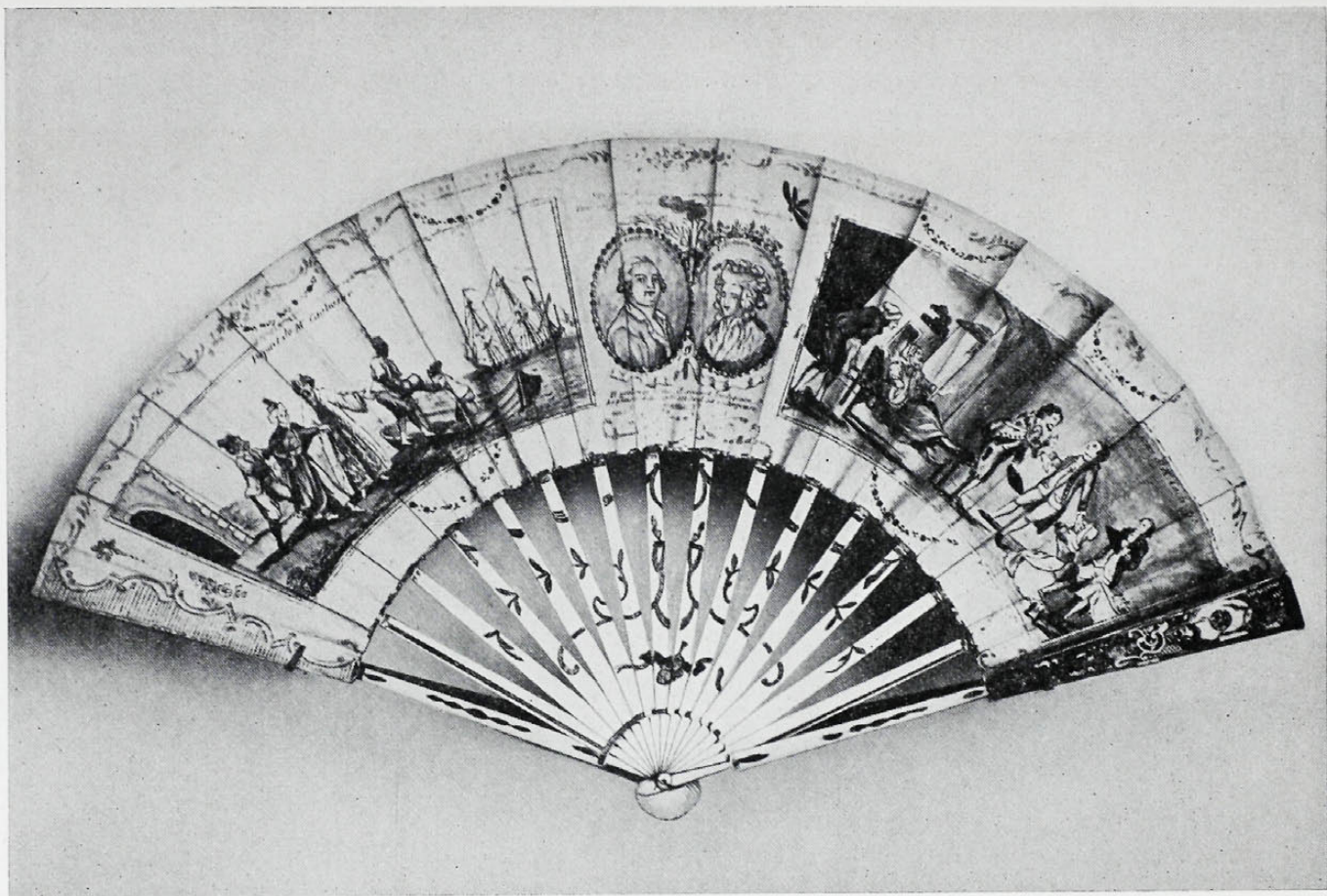
watched with astonishment the chain of wagons passing between Paris and Passy, and wrote to a woman friend: "All France came and comes to see him. All Paris speaks only of him and wishes that the adored man may receive rehabilitation and justice. . . . Everywhere here one sees tobacco boxes and fans à la Cagliostro." The sale of these little boxes and fans and clocks à la Cagliostro shows that he had reached that high point of influence over the masses which, in all times, has been signalized by the transfer of the picture and legend of the hero to the field of applied arts.

Immediately after his arrival in London the exile wrote an epistle to the people of Paris, a description of the horrors of the Bastille animated with glowing hatred. The pamphlet was forbidden but countless copies were bought. The words of Beppo Balsamo fired the very folk who were a little later to storm the Bastille; but at the same time they appealed to the upper circles of that morbid society that played with its own weaknesses, affording noble readers the same voluptuous shudders they felt when Madame Legros painted the sufferings of her innocent husband, a prisoner in the same fortress. Upon one of the fans (Fig. 52) Cagliostro appears as another such innocent, pining prisoner. These fans, today in a private collection in Basle, are evidence of the fact that the incarceration of this "benefactor" of mankind could not destroy the legends that gathered about his image in the minds of his followers; on the contrary, it added the luster of martyrdom to his figure. In the medallion to the left the misjudged Count is shown mourning in the Bastille; that on the right reminds us of all the wonderful cures he had effected. The picture in the center presents the noble visitors of the miracle worker; behind the screen a small girl is visible, one of the many child mediums whom Cagliostro kept and trained for his exhibitions of supernatural voices. A French poem, inscribed upon the reverse of the fan, speaks of the "injustice" that had laid in chains this "amiable Comte," this "âme généreuse et tendre." Surely, suggests the poet, this noble friend of humanity felt no sorrow so keenly as being prevented from assisting the unfortunate yet further. The verse expresses the hope that this selfless sage, the "sçavant désintéressé," would be restored to mankind, and compares the effect of his hotly desired return with the reappearance of the sun in full radiance



52. Fan with a picture of Cagliostro in prison and scenes from the Count's life, intended to keep fresh the memory of his benefactions.





53. *Fan with portraits of Cagliostro and Lorenza and scenes from the life of the great miracle worker.*

*Supposedly from the period of Cagliostro's stay in Paris,  
1785-88.*

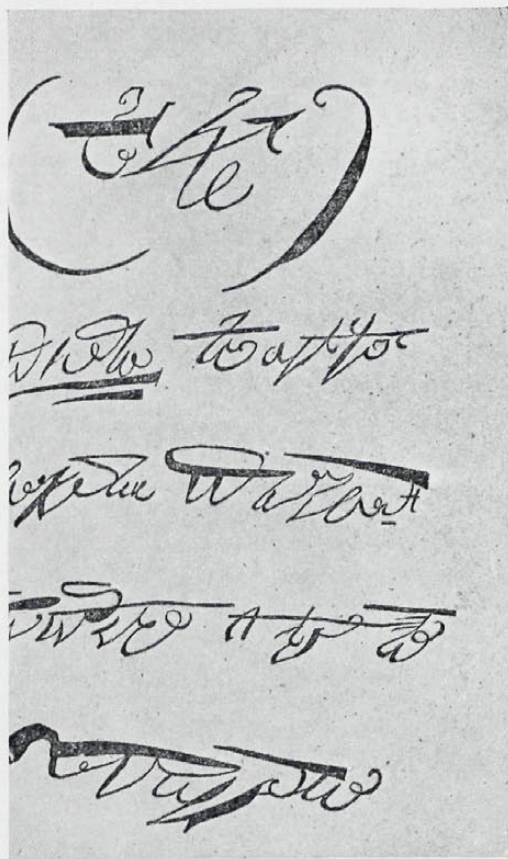


after a long eclipse. On the other fan (Fig. 53) the exiled propagandist is also represented as a benevolent wonder-working physician. To the left is portrayed Cagliostro's departure from the magic land of his origin. He wears Oriental costume. Nothing more vividly illustrates the hazy border line between rationalism and romanticism than the enthusiasm of the eighteenth century for Persian motives [as in Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*] and for "Chinoiserie." The fantasy of the time was most readily tickled by a glimpse of charlatans in exotic garments, as upon this fan. In the middle are portraits of Cagliostro and Lorenza; on the right is shown a sick person on a litter and another woman who kisses the hand of the benefactor. The lines under the picture are the same as those on the well-known portrait engraving by Guérin: "Il prolonge la vie, il secourt l'indigence, Le plaisir d'être utile, est seule sa récompense" [He prolongs life, he rescues the indigent. The pleasure of being useful is his sole recompense]. Count Cagliostro and his spouse were no more willing than their predecessors to be caught earning money; when the Count came to a town he first took up lodgings at an inn, playing the rich and benevolent stranger. Then he would visit the almshouses to distribute free drugs—that was a mixture of free advertising and recognition of class solidarity. Gradually he let it be known that he was a healer.

The poor quality of his drugs was described at length by Hufeland. Elisa von der Recke stressed their perilous nature: "By preference, he was accustomed to prescribe the extract of Saturn very frequently, and indeed in large doses (as he usually did with all his drugs); it has been shown that this sugar of lead was indeed of good effect for the moment, in cases of wounds and other accidents, where quick aid is necessary, but that it often leaves a certain stiffness behind, and if used internally, not seldom causes the unfortunate colic of Poitou." The street arab who had ennobled himself did not attempt to conceal his wrath at the regular doctors and at every opportunity he broke out into a sort of primitive yelping at their science. For doctors he could find no other expressions than those from the animal kingdom. One of his important sources of income was the sale of talismans, handed out in great numbers at a high price. De la Fontaine publishes one of those which Cagliostro put on the market during his stay in Warsaw; the Polish doctor owned the original



and supposed that it was one of the same kind which was later officially burned during the trial in Rome (Fig. 54). It reads: "These magic characters will produce spirit apparitions, trans-



54. One of the many talismans sold at a high price by Cagliostro. This example is a copy preserved and published by the Polish court physician, F. L. de la Fontaine.

mutation of metals, enlargement of diamonds, the philosophers' stone and eternal youth." De la Fontaine adds: "From the unlimited propensity to admire the marvelous, it is possible to explain only in part how it was possible that persons of the finest education and of no mediocre force of intellect could have let themselves be cheated by such an impertinent, common swindler."

After the triumph on Parisian soil, the star of Cagliostro declined. From London he traveled to Basle and Turin; the last

sad appearances as a wonder-working doctor that can be documented were in Trient and Rovereto; in 1789 he turned homewards to Rome. Here necessity drove him to take up his old practices. But the Inquisition stepped in, brought him to trial, and condemned him to lifelong imprisonment. In 1795 he died,



55. *An idealized portrait bust of Cagliostro by Jean Antoine Houdon.*

still defiantly rejecting his Catholic faith, which he abjured with his last breath. Faced with death, the adventurer ceased to be Count Cagliostro, the much-admired "sensitive soul"; he became once more Beppo Balsamo, who spoke the language of the Bastille stormers. He was indeed not a revolutionary, but he belonged to those prerevolutionary figures who were gnawing away like busy mice at the foundations of a social stratum that



they were exploiting; they delivered their victims over to new masters as soon as these had attained power.

How did contemporaries view this "charlatan of charlatans"? They saw him with the eyes of the sculptor Houdon (Fig. 55)



56. *Cagliostro*, by Daniel Chodowiecki. This drawing from the *Berliner Genealogischen Kalender* for 1789 reveals the heavy ugliness of the "Podolian ox."

as a man of genius, an enthusiast and philosopher and, at the same time, a *grand seigneur*; in him they idealized their own despairing credulity. But they also saw him through the satirical eyes of Chodowiecki, in all his ugliness and hypocritical posing (Fig. 56), as the Podolian ox, to which Biester compared him. But whether the marvel-producing Count was regarded as an ideal or as a gross cheat, the whole world discussed him. No



other charlatan was able, as he was, to compel attention from all Europe.

It is well known that Schiller portrayed him in the *Geisterseher*, and Goethe in *Grosskophtha*. When Goethe was in Italy he visited the family of the supposed Count. With the insight thus acquired into the true nature of Cagliostro, Goethe's interest in the adventurer waned and, after the trial under the Inquisition, he wrote:

Who would have believed that Rome would contribute so much to the enlightenment of the world, and to the complete unmasking of a swindler as has been done by the publication of that extract from the procedure of the trial? For although this document might be and ought to be far more interesting, it will yet remain a splendid instrument in the hands of every reasonable man, who for years has had to look on with disgust, observing how deluded and semi-deluded persons and cheats honored this fellow and his comedies, felt themselves elevated above others through communion with him, and from the heights of their arrogant credulity, regretted, if they did not scorn, healthy common sense.

The sharpest attacks upon Cagliostro came from the ranks of the Enlightenment movement. A young Baltic noblewoman, Elisa von der Recke, published her experiences with Cagliostro in book form and her deductions were used again and again in their polemics by the thinkers of the Enlightenment. Elisa described her first encounters with the swindler; shaken by melancholy personal experiences, she was open to his teachings and succumbed, but then, step by step, she slowly came to realize that she had been deceived and by what means. Her story had the value of an honest self-analysis and was moreover rich in details, factual observations, and psychological deductions. Whoever wished to declare himself against charlatanry did so by writing to Elisa to express his agreement. "I cannot thank the worthy authoress enough," wrote Prince Eugene of Württemberg. And Catherine II declared: "The second of the works I have received from you has given me just as much pleasure as the first. Both bear the impress of a heart with deep feeling for the truth, and at the same time of an enlightened and wide-embracing spirit." That Empress had been quick to have the adventurer expelled from Russia; and not content with that,



she had composed three comedies intended to make him ridiculous. Nicolai, the Berlin publisher, translated these into German and published them. Before the first night of one of these comedies, "The Swindler," in St. Petersburg, bills were passed around bearing a text probably composed by the Empress herself:

Although our century has received from all sides the compliment of being called the philosophical century, and although we are ordering in advance the mighty word, Enlightenment, as the inscription for its monument; nevertheless, everywhere a great many heads are dizzied by so enduring a swindle that the Goddess of Wisdom found it necessary to beg the Comic Muse for a remedy for this disease. A humorous comedy suffices to heal the dizzy heads and to preserve forever those that are sound. The enchanted castle, against which Justice and Philosophy are marching from all sides with catapults and ballistas, will here be blown to pieces by the explosive of wit.

Shrewd Catherine was as much inclined as her enlightened friends to overlook the fact that the victims of illusion, who sit enthroned upon what Goethe called the "heights of their arrogant credulity," have long ago forgotten how to laugh, and would never have succumbed to the wiles of the charlatan had they still been able to understand a jest and notice the ridiculous aspects of his pretensions and mystifications.

Cagliostro had so far mastered the minds of his contemporaries that for a time even his imitators shared in his success. Such a one was Magno-Cavallo (Big Horse) of Pomerania. The *Berlinische Monatsschrift* reported in September, 1786, on the activities of "This wonder worker, whose rank and true name no one knows" (just as in the case of the Parisian Cagliostro). He called himself "Mursa dux Tartarus, Philosopho-Medicus-Botanicus-Chymicus-Pharmaceuticus-Poeta-Propheta-Lama-Lamorum-Pontifex-Pontificum" (Fig. 57). On his seal was engraved: "Philosopher, c'est regner; regner, c'est philosophe." Clad in a Turkish costume with a saber and muff, he navigated the rivers of Pomerania in a gondola. His medical achievements were confined to the discovery that the springs of Bad Kenz, in that province, could cure sterility. He conducted gambling banks and soothsayer booths, and occasionally attempted to

meddle in politics, as is shown by his speech on the occasion of the Treaty of Reichenbach. He also published a newspaper in Stralsund, printed on rose-red or fire-yellow paper and entitled, *Neue Lesezeitung zur Bildung des Gemüths, des Genies, des*



57. *Magno-Cavallo, a Pomeranian imitator of Cagliostro.*

*Frontispiece of his Blicke ins 19. Jahrhundert, written in 1798 and published in the nineteenth century.*

*Verstandes und Witzes der schönen und geistreichen Damen* (New Reader Journal for the Education of the Temperament, the Genius, the Intellect, and Wit of Fair and Spirited Ladies). The cities where his influence was strongest were Braunschweig and Celle in Hanover; he never won European fame.

Carlyle closes his *The Diamond Necklace* with a speech put in the mouth of Cagliostro, which reveals the deepest insight into



the abysses of the charlatan's nature. It bears the heading: "Occasional Discourse, by Count Allessandro Cagliostro, Thaumaturgist, Prophet, and Arch Quack; delivered in the Bastille: Year of Lucifer, 5789; of the Mahometan Hegira from Mecca, 1201; of the Cagliostrie Hegira from Palermo, 24; of the Vulgar Era, 1785." Beginning with a grand picture of the realm of scoundrelhood, it closes with an inquiry into the nature of sham:

Friends and Fellow Scoundrels! . . . Yes, brethren, wide as the Sun's range is our Empire, wider than old Rome's in its palmiest era. I have in my time been far; in frozen Muscovy, in hot Calabria, east, west, wheresoever the sky overarches civilized man: and never hitherto saw I myself an alien; out of scoundrelhood I never was. Is it not even said, from of old, by the opposite party: "*All men are liars?*" Do they not (and this nowise "in haste") whimperingly talk of "one just person" (as they call him), and of the remaining thousand save one that take part with us? So decided is our majority. (Applause.) . . .

But the grand problem, Fellow Scoundrels, as you well know, is the *marrying* of Truth and Sham; so that they become *one* flesh, man and wife . . . Wondrously, indeed, do Truth and Delusion play into one another; Reality rests on Dream. Truth is but the *skin* of the bottomless Untrue: and ever, from time to time, the Untrue sheds it; it is clear again; and the superannuated True itself becomes a Fable. Thus do all hostile things crumble back into our Empire; and of its increase there is no end. O brothers, to think of the Speech without meaning (which is mostly ours), and of the Speech with contrary meaning (which is wholly ours), manufactured by the organs of Mankind in one solar day.

The false is so often more agreeable than the true that many persons would gladly surrender themselves to its soothing dreams were they not compelled by their consciences to reject what they believe is a contradiction to the truth. It will not avail the charlatan to offer mere falsehoods to the conscientious; he must go to work more subtly, as Carlyle's archquack explains. The charlatan relativizes truth; he erects his own system of highly popular ethics wherein all standards, all values, from the merely qualitative to the moral, are upset. He whittles down the truth until it becomes no more than a veneer over the "bottomless Un-

true." When the border line between truth and sham seems so indefinite, the followers of the charlatan can no longer admire genuineness in things or persons; they cease to admire the incorruptible men and women who run risks for the truth, and even sacrifice their lives to it. By all this breaking down of principles the charlatan manages to make his falsehoods acceptable, if not exactly as truths, at least as substitutes for the truth. He thus gives succor to the many who longed to believe in the comfortable and convenient lie; he offers them, not truth or sham, but the product of their marriage: illusion.



V

THE MARVELS OF TECHNOLOGY,  
A NEW FORM OF MAGIC





## The Enlightenment and Its Automata

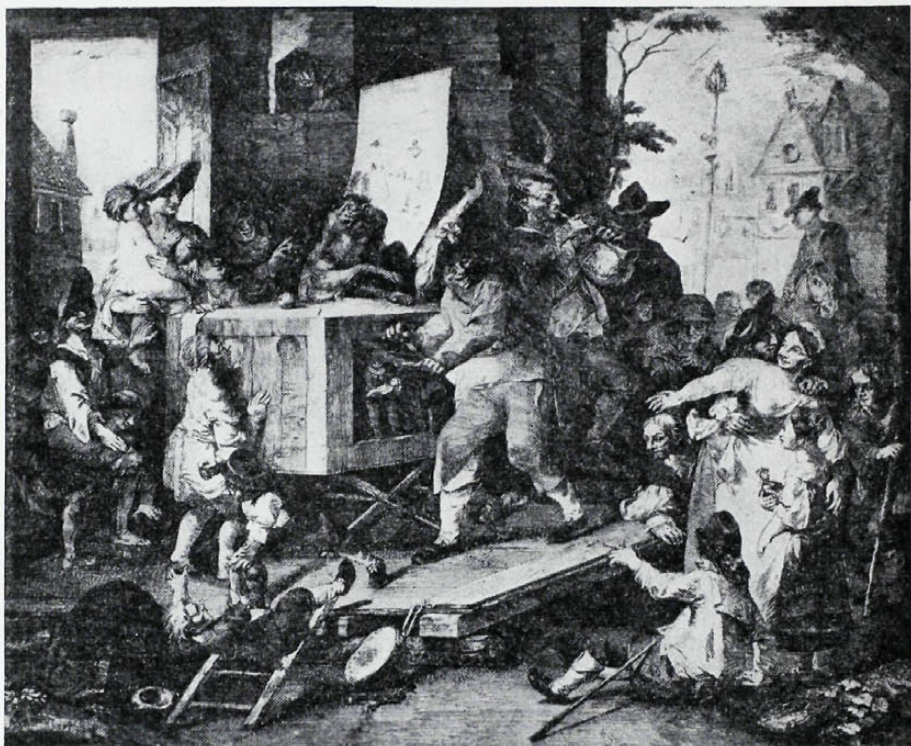
MECHANICAL marvels began to appear in the market fairs of Europe in ever-increasing numbers during the last three decades of the 1700's and enjoyed a high popularity by the turn of the century. The inventors who constructed them satisfied a newly awakened interest in technology on the part of the public; usually they exhibited electrical experiments, telescopes, mechanical games, and optical illusions of various sorts, all bizarre effects that fitted in well with the more traditional performances of "magic." But these were only side shows; the chief attractions presented were figures of wood or wax, some diminutive and some life size, run by concealed springs and wheels, which appeared to move of their own accord as though animated by a mysterious spirit, and were capable of producing music or even of speaking and whispering oracular advice in artificial accents that hinted at the supernatural. In ancient times such contrivances had been seen at the courts of Eastern sultans, and they were not unknown in the West during the Middle Ages. Now they were revived at a moment when mankind, standing on the verge of a mechanical and industrial revolution but not yet comprehending the wonders of the new age, regarded them as the fabulous creations of a fairy tale.

Something of the awe that surrounded the early robots may be felt in the engraving of Maulpertsch (Fig. 58). The scene is a fair; with a gesture that promises miracles, a wandering quacksalver is drawing aside a rag of a curtain from his peep show. The object so importantly disclosed is a miniature harlequin, holding in its arms a tiny white figure—is it a corpse?—of a child. Certainly this automaton is capable of mechanical motion, but it is very primitive compared to the delicate and complex devices shown at the same period to more exacting audiences. The onlookers are more than satisfied, however; they are thrilled. The little girl in the foreground, holding a doll, seems lost in wonder; her face expresses an infatuation that borders on idiocy. The man sitting on the ground before her is involuntarily pointing to the apparition, at which everyone is staring



anyway. The atmosphere of lurid suspense evoked by the artist belongs to a cheap criminal romance. There is an ominous quality in it.

No doubt that was why rationalists who had attacked older forms of charlatanry, from the standpoint of the Enlightenment, now assailed the popular craze for automata. Nicolai,



58. *The strolling magician with a peep show.*

*Etching by Franz Anton Maulpertsch, circa 1790.*

Biester, and the circle around the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* referred constantly to the new deceivers of the people, the wonder mechanics. The term "prestidigitator" and even more often "charlatan" was applied to these miracle mongers, who indeed no longer made gold or elixirs but profited from mechanical illusion. One reason for that suspicion was hinted by Voltaire, referring to Vaucanson, the most famous constructor of automata in his time:



Le hardi Vaucanson, rival de Prométhée  
 Semblait, de la nature imitant les ressorts,  
 Prendre le feu des cieux pour animer le corps.

(Bold Vaucanson, rival of Prometheus, imitating the energies of nature, appears to take fire from the heavens to animate the body.)

An imitator, a counterfeiter of nature—that, despite the heroic mythologizing of the mechanical, is the insinuation in Voltaire's lines. Vaucanson's skill in simulating natural forms and gestures was revealed in his famous flute player and in the little automatic duck that could pick up and swallow kernels of grain, two devices which not only occupied the public mind but drew serious attention from the French Academy of Sciences. Many of the puppets produced by imitators of Vaucanson were clad like Persian sorcerers or Oriental magi. Some were life size, seated on costly chairs; others, charmingly tiny, popped out of "weather houses" or clocks, at a certain stroke, to predict the future by word or action. There was a decided resemblance between such exhibitions and the stage shows of the mountebanks, but in this case the functions of living men were transferred to robots; the customers sought information on fate or the future not from the charlatan but his automata. The enigmatic answers to their dark questions, however, had a more transcendental and marvelous ring when they came from the lips of mechanical men than ever they had in the mouths of the mountebanks themselves, no matter how foreign and mysterious these had pretended to be. Here is a phenomenon which calls for some explanation.

The August issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, in 1789, contains a contribution from a state mining official, Karsten, an expert in the field of mechanical contrivances, describing that "perambulating wonder mechanic," L. Müller, maker and exhibitor of talking machines, then traveling about to country markets and fairs. *Continuo peregrinantur*. Evidently the newest showmen were as roving in their habits as the older charlatans, and their advertising remained true to the Eisenbarth formula: "His [Müller's] handbill announces that he comes to this place, not only, as is understood, out of self-interest, but

far more to enjoy the honor of appearing here." A feminine puppet was one of his creations: "One sees the head and bust of a small woman, made up like a chambermaid, who holds a big trumpet to her mouth." A conversation with this woman of wood and leather was conducted through the trumpet, just as the parrot in Fig. 17 spoke to the dwarf lady through a tube. The dialogue ran as follows:

Q. "Are you pleased to be here in Halle, my pretty Caroline?"

A. "So far, quite well."

Q. "Have you already been in Leipzig?"

A. "No, not yet."

Q. "Will you go there?"

A. "Perhaps to the fair."

Q. "How old are you?"

A. "It is not gallant to ask such a question of a lady."

Q. "What religion do you profess?"

A. "That of my master."

Q. "To what church does he belong?"

A. "The Catholic."

Q. "Has no one yet learned your arts?"

A. "The most learned always shot widest of the mark."

Karsten concludes:

If Herr Müller did not go to work with such excessive presumption, and if he showed somewhat more respect for the reason of the persons who come to him, then one would be able to regard him with as much indifference as any prestidigitator who throws down from a window a ring that somebody in the assemblage later finds on his finger. But his behavior earns him, so I believe, the name of a charlatan at least: because he not only tries to persuade the world that his machine can produce and put together articulated sounds, but even maintains that he works upon this machine through an invisible influence (a certain magnetism), and brings forth reasonable answers. . . . Such things most strongly nourish superstition. And there is still a mass of men who, gladly and with a kind of triumphant raillery at reason and science, immediately demand a satisfactory explanation from those persons who call such exhibits a fraud—as they are—and, if it is not possible to produce the explanation at once, then indulge in high-sounding phrases about the inexplicability of the performance.



The observations of this mining official contain a correct diagnosis, indeed, but one conditioned by the age, and they show very clearly why the leaders of the Enlightenment had taken a wrong defensive position; they attacked the enemy, superstition, with keen weapons but in the wrong place. The pretty Caroline, with her pertly coquettish reply, "The most learned always shot widest of the mark," struck precisely that tone of "triumphant raillery against reason and science" which Karsten had noticed, and which has ever formed one of the strongest resources of the charlatan. The observation that the predestined dupes of the impostor are quick to ask questions, usually such as admit of no answer, we have already mentioned as a characteristic of the semieducated. They feel only too happy when the learned gentlemen cannot supply the answers; the half taught, who, with gnawing resentment have always felt themselves despised by the learned, can then disdain the scholar and regard themselves as regular professors in the faculty of the inexplicable. This the eager promulgators of the Enlightenment movement did not understand: they thought the masses really wanted to know. When the half educated asked their frivolous questions, the experts of the Enlightenment began at once to explain. They explained and explained, volubly and persistently—they explained their heads off.

In 1779 appeared the first volume of Johann Christian Wieg-  
 leb's *Unterricht in der natürlichen Magie oder zu allerhand  
 belustigenden und nützlichen Kunststücken* (Instruction in Nat-  
 ural Magic or for All Manner of Amusing and Useful Tricks).  
 This work attained wide circulation, but it won real fame and  
 exercised enduring influence only much later when the poets of  
 the German Romanticism read it. A highly curious form of  
 success! The men of the Enlightenment strove to explain tricks  
 in order to dissipate the power and spoil the business of the  
 quacks who peddled scientific marvels—their explanations did  
 not move the crowds away from the booths, but instead inspired  
 the fantastic ghost stories of E. T. A. Hoffmann! It is clear that  
 the zealous popular educators of the eighteenth century had  
 made a false reckoning. When Wieg-  
 leb put the word "magic"  
 in his title, it was with the intention of destroying its enchant-  
 ment; he used it in the Paracelsian sense, as a searcher for the  
 truth, a carrier of "white magic." But the world that was opened



to the excited imagination of Hoffmann when he read Wiegleb was the realm of black magic, enslaved to the devil, although, of course, it was a magic divested of medieval religious connotations as well as of the old cruelty and horror. Hoffmann's magic was costumed à l'Empire, to suit the tastes of an age of romantic sensibility.

Wiegleb's attack on the forces of superstition had run to twenty volumes, all neatly ordered and illustrated with instructive copper engravings. He had exposed the operations of the famous mechanical chess player, made by Von Kempelen and exhibited at the Russian Imperial Court—the automaton that beat the Empress at play. He also explained the construction of the modern *Laterna magica*, and gave directions for making a Magic Oracle or small "soothsayer temple," as well as for changing the color of all the guests' clothing at a banquet. As far as they could be compressed into twenty volumes, Wiegleb did his best to describe electrical, magnetic, optical, chemical, and mechanical tricks, with additional chapters on card tricks, games, and illusion effects. The tricks so laid bare were exactly those performed by the traveling exhibitors at the fairs, as we learn from the gazettes of the period. What the author intended to do is told in the prefaces. In an introduction to the first volume the concept of magic is discussed:

If we look at popular usage, we observe that all the wonderful phenomena which we cannot easily explain by known laws of nature are customarily called witchcraft or magic by the people. A prestidigitator shows a peasant a torn piece of twine, blows upon it, and in a moment the twine is whole again. The peasant, who does not think that this can be explained by any natural laws known to him, exclaims: There is something uncanny here! The fellow is a wizard! This is the reason behind the names of such objects as the magic funnel, the magic goblet, the magic spring, the magic barrel and the magic lantern. Magic, in its widest sense, is thus the art of producing phenomena which appear to exceed the natural forces of a human being.

From the preface to the third volume it appears that the twenty-volume guidebook has no other aim than to make clear to "the peasant" that there is nothing uncanny about such marvels, if one only learns their real composition: "Knowledge of the hidden



natural connections will satisfy his curiosity and entertain him as well. This will also have the practical result that no one can pass off tricks of legerdemain and imposture as hitherto unknown forces of nature. And when should this be more necessary than in our time, which has produced such men as Schröpfer, Gassner, Cagliostro, and the miraculous properties of magnetism?"

A sober explanation of the mysterious properties of natural objects, an exhaustive popular education, so the Enlightened thought, would take the mask from the marvelous and destroy the stubborn faith in magic and its charlatans—Cagliostro, the archcharlatan, is referred to by name—and would deprive the wonder mechanics of their audiences. Falsely, they supposed that knowledge and the comprehension of "mysterious" events were demanded by the people, or had the power to work as antidotes to superstition. Their laborious explanations had the effect of stones offered instead of bread; they pleased nobody. The leaders of the Enlightenment called upon modern science, and in particular upon technology, to assist them in their battle against the charlatan and the illusions which he conjured up out of the dank depths of his followers' subconscious. But the mythology they drove out and expelled was not gone from the world; it hid itself and became entrenched where the Enlightened least expected it and where it therefore remained most invisibly concealed: behind modern science itself, behind technology. Science and technology became magical.

With a highly misleading and enmeshing magic power, science and technology worked upon the imagination of men, blinding and binding them with a superfluity of new inventions and opening such perspectives into the future as no previous generations had ever known. In a much deeper sense than the Enlightened men of sober reason could realize, therefore, the scientist's funnels, goblets, springs, barrels, and lanterns became magic funnels, magic goblets, magic barrels and lanterns; he appeared to have wrought that "magic transmutation" that would kindle human hopes and human yearnings once more at its flame. With tragi-comic blindness, Wiegleb chose for the title of a harmless description in Volume XI: "The Magic Transmutation: the exterior presents a four-square little casket that is eleven inches broad and long and five inches high, and provided with a drawer."



He could not see the profound applicability of the word magic to such devices.

Little boxes exercised an extraordinary fascination over the men and women of that time, and music boxes, especially, appealed to them. Out of these toys, with a thin, eerie little voice, in an unpretentious and yet compelling rhythm, the rhythm of monotony, sang an invisible spirit that was close at hand and yet seemed to call from afar. It was a new music, the voice of the machine, which rang from all the tiny boxes and clocks. The touch of the miraculous lay not upon the music but the machine, for as yet, the science of mechanics was young and half formed; darkness and confusion reigned in many of its fields, a state of affairs that the charlatan found propitious. When sciences are in that critical stage when they seem to hold out unlimited opportunities to whet the desires of the masses, the charlatan always steps in. He now turned to mechanics, as it began to broaden out into technology, and derived from it as many impressive learned expressions as he had previously found in alchemistic lore; he saw in it, as well, scope for the eternal dream of transmutation. Technology was the alchemy of the new generation which, in 1783, saw the first hot-air balloon of the Montgolfier brothers rise from the earth.

Many antirational elements were to be found mingled in the enthusiasm surrounding the early experiments with balloons, electricity, and steam. In fact, the rationalism of the eighteenth century had not so much destroyed the devotional fervor of the masses as diverted it from its old objects, kings and saints; the need for heroes remained. And though the cult of the patron saint began to die out in that epoch, the cult of the scientist was taking its place. Ironically, one of the first of this new line of heroes was Franklin, the hater of heroics; his kite, the symbol of his Promethean defiance of "thunderbolts and tyrants," became almost as much of a magic attribute as the arrows of St. Sebastian. The extraordinary veneration of Franklin in Europe as well as in America was in part the reflection of a thwarted emotionalism craving a new outlet; when the French National Assembly went into mourning for his death, in 1790, it declared the homage paid to him a "religious act." And so Franklin, the embodiment of common sense, was, contrary to his intentions, the generator of a fresh line of mythology.



Franklin himself belonged to the rare band of those impervious to the charlatan's appeal. Invited by the French Government to join in a learned commission formed to investigate the claims of Mesmer, he assisted in preparing a report that was a model of temperance and clarity. Not too bigoted a rationalist to admit the possibility of truth in some of Mesmer's ideas, he was yet able to separate the plausible from the chaff of fantasy. For a time the name of Franklin lent great weight to this enlightened explanation and in America, indeed, it was said that he had "killed" mesmerism. But not for long. Traditional objects of veneration were even scarcer in America than in Europe and channels for the emotions of wonder and loyalty were fewer; however, where the possibilities of industrial development and profit making seemed so unlimited, it was easy to believe in scientific utopias. The excited imagination of Americans, playing with the future of science, was accordingly to be exploited by quacks in the nineteenth century: the "steam doctors" who sweated their patients, the "chronothermalists" who gave them electric shocks and electric medicines. And the mesmerists came back in the company of spiritualists, table tippers, and phrenologists. Somnambulism was repopularized in part by the tales of Edgar Allan Poe, clearly reflecting the weird pseudo science of the German Romanticist, E. T. A. Hoffmann. Hoffmann saw the marvelous and uncanny aspects of automata which moved like men in a trance, and of mesmerism which made living men look and behave like wax figures; under the influence of Hoffmann, Poe seems to have created his *Ligeia* and other pale cataleptic ladies. Thus Poe in a sense helped to destroy the educational work of Franklin; the poet undid the scientist through romanticizing science.

The instinct for magic lived on, in the new as well as the older worlds, despite the efforts of critics and experts. Vainly they continued to "enlighten" and explain, to unmask charlatans. Most of the results they achieved were as dubious as those of the author who signed himself "der getreue Eckarth," taking the name of that protective spirit of old Germanic mythology supposed to shield children at night and by crossroads when the "wild huntsman" rides abroad. At the beginning of this century, in 1719, he published at Frankfurt *Des getreuen Eckarths Medizinischer Maul-Affe oder der Entlarvte Markt-Schreyer*



(The Faithful Eckarth's Medical Gape Ape, or the Mountebank Unmasked). In the frontispiece of this work—which forms that of the present book also—the righteous Eckarth is seen unmasking a charlatan; he tears off a wig and mask with smiling, smooth countenance from the head of a quack who calls himself “The Eternal Apollo,” and reveals the true visage of the fraud, that of a “Maul-Affe” (an untranslatable German play on words: a *Maul-Affe* is a loud-mouthed ignoramus, a “Gape Ape,” one might say). But the ape head appears no less mysterious than the smooth, fair face of the mask; indeed, it suggests a more secret shudder. Unmasking does not always break the spell; often it but adds a special morbid attraction to the impostor. In the effort to combat charlatanry, the Enlightenment itself often moved over the border line of reason to a dangerous degree. And superstition lived on, as we see in an amusing handbill advertising the healing waters of Pouhon (Fig. 59), an illustration of the uncrushable resilience of the popular will to belief. The handbill, dating from the end of the eighteenth century, shows the waters of Pouhon, in which dolphins play; cascades of the curative fluid spray into goblets held up by cupids and shower on the “insecte,” as it is called in the French text, and “Gedierste” in the Dutch translation below. This insect is “represented in its natural size,” a magnificent specimen of zoölogy, which came swimming from the kidneys of a woman after she had sipped the marvelous waters of Pouhon.

Over all the explanations, the proofs, and tests, over the whole imposing array of the facts, strode the automata, stiffly vivacious, with their coyly tittered answers, trampling under wooden feet the whole achievements of the would-be educators. In vain Wiegleb carefully disclosed the principles on which a wooden head could be built that would “give replies to all questions laid before it; commonly called the Cicero's head.” He was not able to dispel the old yearning for an all-wise sage that drove the populace to the soothsayers' tents. The fact that it was not a man of flesh but a set of wheels that answered them only increased the fascination. Still more enchanting than the Cicero's head they found charming young girls that could dance or sing, play the harpsichord, or whisper delphic advice. Thanks to the arts of the clever Swiss watchmakers in Geneva, automata became much cheaper toward the end of the eighteenth century;



they were produced in quantity, whereas up to then they had been rare, seen only as "Jacquemarts" on an occasional church tower, or moving as rows of apostles to the music of chimes. Since these figures touched such a responsive chord in mankind, the imagination of the inventors was stimulated to create some



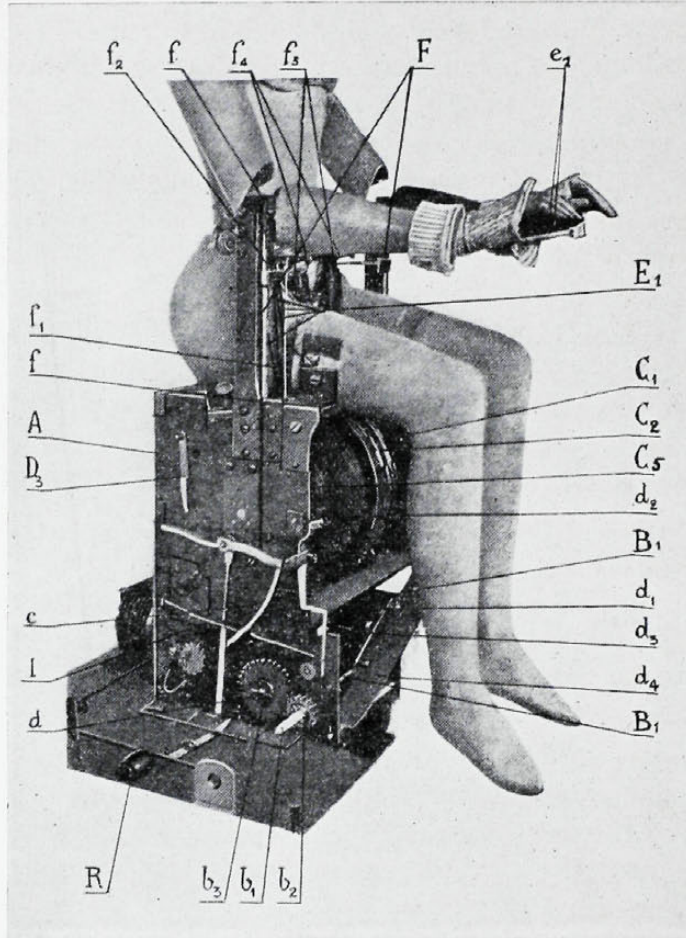
59. Handbill advertising the curative waters of Pouhon. It shows a "life-size" image of a strange "Insecte" that was removed from a woman's kidneys by a "cure" at Pouhon.

*End of the eighteenth century.*

very bizarre forms. Little mice made of pearls crept quickly over *bonbonnières*; clever artisans bent and straightened upon delicate windmills; frogs and bears played upon the drum, or crabs and lizards, all ingeniously constructed, might spring out of sewing baskets, pocket watches, tobacco pouches, or other objects of daily use, like Oriental genii. The twittering artificial birds were especially admired. About 1800 there was a very renowned automaton in the form of a pistol. This weapon was inlaid in costly fashion with gold, enamel, and pearls. When it was cocked, as if to fire, a little bird flew out. It was covered

with feathers, beat its wings, and could move its tiny beak. Flut-  
ing a short song, it returned, when it had charmed the sensibilities  
of its audience, to its peaceful little nest, the pistol.

The desire to copy nature through automatous figures arose



60. The "Musicienne," one of the famous automatic figures of the Swiss inventor, Pierre Jaquet-Droz. At the end of the eighteenth century many of the charlatan's old functions, such as horoscope casting, were transferred to the robots constructed by ingenious technicians.

from the materialistic climate of the age: men wished to fabricate not only all sorts of new wares but man himself and animals. The utilitarians intended to regulate life according to a me-



chanical pattern and to repress all metaphysical concepts. But these same little magic copies of nature, seemingly moved by hidden forces, became the seat of the divinity that was supposedly driven away. What earthly woman possessed the perverse charm of the "Musicienne" constructed by the Swiss inventor, Pierre Jaquet-Droz from La Chaux-de-Fonds? Throned on powerful wheels, reigning over the artful work like an unapproachable goddess, she touched the keys with long, delicate fingers over which fell cuffs of lace. Could not a mountebank of this period attract more followers with her than with potable gold or the philosophers' stone? The passion for puppets was reflected in advertisements, which continually showed automata. A painted head of wood, such as French dentists commonly used in the early nineteenth century (Fig. 61), met the tastes of the public very cleverly. It is not larger than an infant's head, is painted the daintiest flesh color, and probably did not always wear the rather shocking aspect that time has given it through injuries and scratches in the glaze. Nevertheless, its face, framed by coarse dark hair, with the stiff eyelashes over fixed bright glass eyes, and the oblique set of teeth, must, even when quite new, have suggested the uncanny, an effect which the movability of the teeth and eyes was calculated to heighten. But it was just this hint of the supernatural that lent their great attraction to such robots. The swift progress of the amazing new technology, which set all these puppets to singing and playing, seemed to herald a new romanticism; it brought a pleasure compounded of delight and horror, and threw spectators into a sweat of enjoyable anxiety, a frame of mind that has always been ideal for the charlatan's purposes (as in Fig. 7). The wheeled wax figures created an illusion for a disillusioned world. Against this process, the advocates of sober reason and practicality could do nothing with their neat explanations; indeed they helped to conjure up the illusions which they were powerless to exorcize: a disappointed society sought to recapture in technology the supernatural world it had lost.

Achim von Arnim, one of the poets of the German Romantic movement, stood in rapture before one of those panoramas which, through a technical illusion, seemed to present the perspectives of a distant vista. He was entranced by the poetic effect of the mechanical trick. And one may find in the sober and

sobering textbook of Wiegleb an illustration that has a more ghostly quality than all the phantoms that flit through the Romantics' stories. This chart, explaining the "electrical dance," (Fig. 62) shows a trembling little man floating in space, apparently sustained by a mighty eye; the eye might well belong

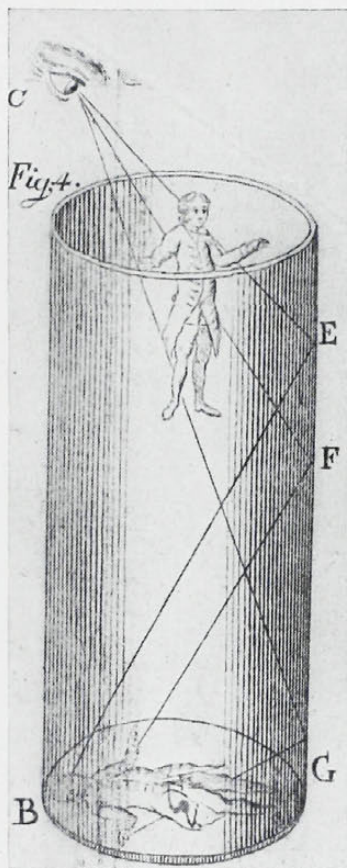


61. Painted wooden head from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Such automata with movable eyes and teeth, served as advertisements of French dentists.

to that uncanny magician so often described by Hoffmann, and the little man reminds one of that maiden inclosed in a glass ball of whom the Romantics were fond of dreaming—another optical illusion that the Enlightenment sought to explain. The whole picture belongs less to an instructive textbook than to the *Tales* of Hoffmann; it might accompany that strange story of the salon with enchanted mirrors where a living man danced with Olympia, the lifeless puppet.



When the natural sciences and technology became thus mythologized, they lent themselves to charlatanry. It was possible for a charlatan like Giuseppe Tallinucci (Fig. 63) to call himself a Professor of Experimental Physics on his visiting card, and

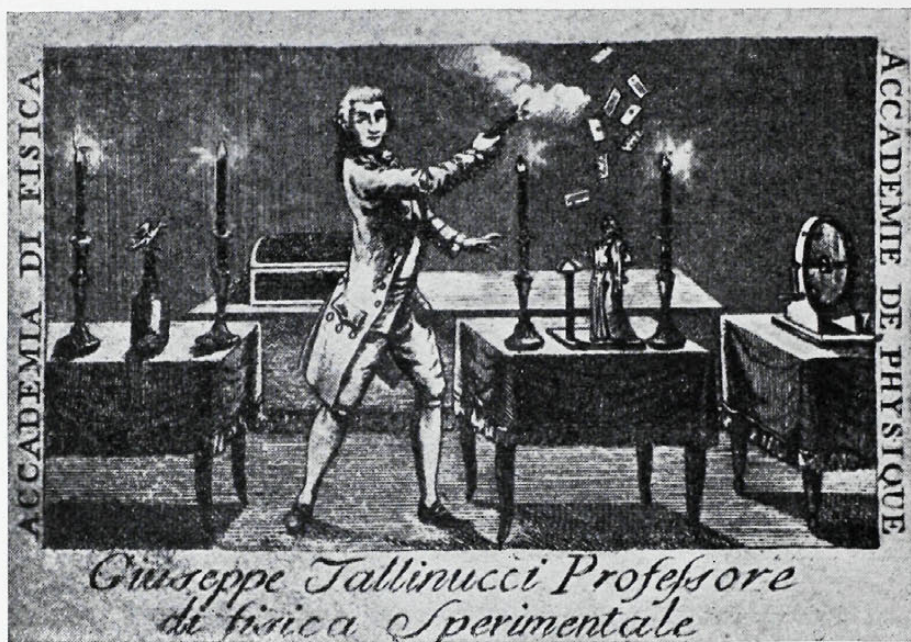


62. The "Electric Dance," an illustration from Johann Christian Wiegleb's textbook on magic, published in 1779. Though the author of this once highly popular book intended to enlighten the superstitious, his pictures had a contrary effect; they conveyed a romantic and magical impression to the poets of the age.

represent himself in the act of carrying out one of the very tricks exposed by Wiegleb's textbook. In fact, Tallinucci stole the copper engraving which he honored by using for his card from another textbook of magic. Thus nothing so threatened the advance of the Enlightenment movement as its misguided under-

estimation of the power of half education, semienlightenment. Wiegleb had many readers, but a far wider audience was found for the *Feen-Geister-Geheimnis und Zaubereyjournal*, *veranstaltet durch drey Feen* (The Fairy Spirit Mystery and Magic Journal, prepared by Three Fairies).

The *Berlinische Monatsschrift* was never weary of revealing the fact that many of the talking machines really contained a



63. Visiting card of the charlatan Tallinucci, who stole the picture, engraved by Antonio Zacco of Catania, from Decresp's *Die entlarvte weisse Magie*, published at Messina in 1743.

miserable little man, who produced oracular replies and made the chess moves. Usually this assistant was condemned to lead a wretched existence; the master mechanic brought him food and completely shut him off from the world, in order to hide the secret. Not infrequently, such pitiable accomplices died of suffocation. What made it necessary for them to squeeze themselves into such small compass was the fact that a complicated apparatus with wheels had to be introduced inside the puppet and exhibited, although it had no real function at all, because the public would have found nothing wonderful about the figure



had it been denied a glimpse into its mechanical entrails. And so man had to bend low, to creep and crawl, in order to make room for a fiction—the fiction of the machine which smothered him and profited the charlatan.

The ninth volume of Wiegleb contains a description of “The Speaking Figure of Antonio Gigli,” which represented the climax and trump card of charlatanry in that field. “This maker of watches and machines in Genoa had constructed a figure representing a Chinese, life size, who sat upon a large cushion and greeted the spectators assembled about him, looking at each individually with his movable eyes, and could open and shut his mouth, and speak a few words in the Chinese language.” Here Wiegleb adds a footnote remarking that the notion of making a puppet speak Chinese was a good one because conversation was avoided in this way; that perhaps this figure did really speak Chinese, but, if so, it could only have been the result of a deception. And, Wiegleb went on:

During all this a mouse crept out of the folds of the garment and ran down his arm to the hand. Hereupon the puppet sat down in proper position and beat out a sonata on the cymbals. At the first beat he made with his hand the mouse crept back to its hiding place. When the sonata was over, the figure thanked the spectator and bowed on all sides, at the same time speaking a few words, which were accompanied by chimes. After all these motions, at last the belly of the figure opened itself and showed the spectators the machinery that seemed to animate it.

As the final and highest triumph of this magic exhibition, which flattered the ears and eyes of the public, stood, therefore, the revelation of the “inner works.” Thus the artists of counterfeiting exploited the average man’s vague knowledge about science. Technology could be made to promise wonders as great as those of the old alchemistic “multiplication”; it could lengthen life and gild it by making it easier. And so it was ideally suited to serve the impostor. Whoever could dominate mechanical forces could rule men; like gold, the machine gave power over men and life. And technology, like gold, enslaved the dupes who fondly imagined that they were its masters.

Supposedly so cold and precise, the science of technology was really surrounded by an atmosphere of emotionalism. And even



the very critics of the Enlightenment who most denounced the automata were not wholly immune to the charm of "figures that ape men in form and movement," as Hoffmann called them. The weak point of the critics was the conflict going on in their own minds: the mingling of repulsion and secret desire. How their own inner security was shaken and perforce their resistance power against charlatanry is shown impressively by a tale of Hoffmann, written in 1814, called *The Automaton*. This begins:

The Talking Turk made a general stir; indeed he set the whole town in motion, for young and old, high and low, came streaming, from morning until far into the night, to hearken to the oracular utterances that were whispered to the curious from the stiff lips of the marvelous figure, so alive and yet so dead. . . . The whole figure was beautifully proportioned, and above all the head was most successfully executed; a physiognomy of truly Oriental spirituality gave an animation to the whole such as one seldom finds among wax figures, even when they are modeled on the countenances of men of spirit and character. A light fence inclosed the work of artifice and kept the spectators at a distance; for only *he* was admitted to the inner circle and could approach the figure who desired to convince himself of the general structure, as far as the artist let this be seen, without disclosing its secret, or someone who wished to put questions. . . . Aside from the movement of the head, which occurred every time before he answered, the Turk used to raise the right arm occasionally and either threaten with the finger or turn down the question, so to speak, with the whole hand. When this happened only the repeated insistence of the questioner could produce a reply, mostly ambiguous or peevish; and it is quite likely that these movements of the arms and head were related to that apparatus of wheels, even though in this case the interference of a rational being seemed indispensable. . . . In spite of the tasteful embellishment and the highly enigmatic and wonderful air of the whole masterpiece, the interest of the public would soon have flagged had the artist not been able to attract the attention of the spectators afresh through another means. This lay in the answers themselves which the Turk returned, and which were every time remarkably appropriate, showing a deep insight into the individuality of the questioner, and were made now dry, now decidedly coarse and jocose, and again



full of spirit and acuteness, and marvelously suitable to the point of being painful. Often the figure afforded a mystic glance into the future which startled those present because it seemed impossible to penetrate so deeply into the mind of the interrogator.

The Turk, or the "Professor" who guided him, was a shrewd judge of human character, as a charlatan had to be. Two friends, Ludwig and Ferdinand, while attending a *soirée*, hear of the new attraction. "Both had to admit to their shame that they had not yet visited the Turk, even though it was considered good form to go there and retail the answers that one had received to catchy questions." Ludwig expressed his skepticism of the Turk and his kind, whereas Ferdinand was more inclined to fall victim to such phenomena. Nevertheless, Ludwig suggests:

His figure, which, according to the description of all who have seen him, is very impressive and venerable, is something quite subordinate; and his eye rolling and head shaking are certainly intended only to attract our attention wholly to *him*, where the key to the secret is assuredly *not* to be found. That breath comes from the mouth of the Turk is possible or perhaps certain, since experience shows it to be so; but from this it does not follow that this breath really comes from the spoken words. There is no doubt that a human being, through some acoustic and optical contraptions concealed or unknown to us, is somehow in contact with the questioner, and is able to hear and see him and whisper the answers. . . . What seems to me much more remarkable and in fact really attracts me, however, is the mental force of that unknown human being which enables him to penetrate so deeply the mood of the questioner—the answers often betray such a shrewdness and yet such an awe-inspiring ambiguity that they become oracular in the strictest sense of the word.

Ludwig is reluctant to venture into that realm of ambiguity, of double meanings and uncanny chiaroscuro, but at last he is persuaded to accompany Ferdinand, and the two set off to visit the Turk. This figure appears at first unwilling to converse, but at last, questioned in a low voice by Ferdinand, he returns an answer which causes his interrogator to blench. He had asked about a mysterious girl whom he loved, and the reply was: "Unfortunate one! In the moment when thou beholdest her again,



she is lost to thee!" He confides to his friend the dark story of his love, now overshadowed by such dire forebodings. Ludwig advises an inspection of the automata, a visit to the Professor, hoping to solve the secret of the words that have so disquieted his friend.

The old magician greeted them: "Well, here with me, you will find what you may seek in vain throughout all Europe, yes, in the whole world." The Professor's voice had a repulsive quality; it was a high, rasping, dissonant tenor, according well with the mountebank manner in which he praised his masterpieces. Ludwig put questions directed to solve the riddle. But the Professor merely beckoned them to follow and went ahead with the keys to open the realm of the robots: "The Professor passed by the orchestrion and the music boxes without special attention, and barely touched the automata; but then he seated himself at the piano and began to play, *pianissimo*, a marchlike *andante*; as he came to the end and began to repeat, the flute player set the flute to its mouth and played the theme. Now the boy beat out the rhythm gently on the drum, while another touched a triangle in a hardly audible fashion. Soon after the female figure broke in with resonant full-toned chords, bringing out a harmonica-like tone by pressing the keys! But now all grew quicker and livelier in the whole hall; the musical boxes chimed in with the greatest rhythmical exactness, the boy struck his drum ever more forcefully, the triangle cried aloud in the room, and at last the orchestra trumpeted and banged in such a *fortissimo* that everything was set a-trembling and quaking, until the Professor at his machine ended it all with one crash of a closing chord." Quite benumbed, the friends took leave of "mechanic and machines." Ludwig broke out in a rage because he saw that he had been cheated by all this enchantment of the information which he had come to get. Ferdinand, who, like all predestined dupes, had long ago lost sight of the goal, praised the mechanical masterpieces of the Professor, the pleasing tones, the wonderful and "harmonious relation of the machines." But Ludwig countered: "All that is just what makes me furious! All that mechanical music, with which I reckon the Professor's piece on the piano as well, makes me feel as though I had gone through a fulling mill and a kneading machine, until I feel it in every



limb and will be a long time recovering from it." He passed severe judgment on the

senseless attempt to make the *mediae* alone achieve what should be achieved only by the inner force of the soul . . . The effort of the mechanics to imitate more and more closely the human organs and produce musical notes or substitute for them by mechanical means is to me like a declared war against the spiritual principle, whose power will be more victorious the more forces are arrayed against it. For that reason do I regard that machine which is the most perfect according to mechanical concepts as the most despicable, and I should prefer a simple hand organ, which has no other purpose than the mechanical, to the flute player and harmonica player of Vaucanson.

Ludwig had perceived that charlatanry comes in where things are introduced into the mechanical realm that have nothing to do with it. Wavering between the two figures that he created, Ludwig and Ferdinand, the author lets the latter disappear from the city and write a letter to his friend, saying that events have confirmed the oracle of the Professor. But the tale was not ended; like its author, it wavered indecisively and could not find a solution. It remained a fragment.

Many have speculated on the reasons that led Hoffmann to leave this tale unfinished. It would seem that he preferred to make it a "riddle among riddles," as the mysterious Count in Achim von Arnim's *Gräfin Dolorès* likes to term himself. Arnim's creation, the Count, is made to appear, a distinguished traveler, toward the end of a hot summer evening in Helmstedt. That was the little town in which lived the original of Hoffmann's Professor: Gottfried Christoph Beireis.

## Gottfried Christoph Beireis, an Official Charlatan

WE were, however, attracted by the possibility of an adventure of our own. The remarkable man, Court Councillor Beireis, in Helmstedt, has been known for many years as a problematic character in many respects. I had so often heard mention of him, his surroundings, his curious possessions, his odd behavior, as well as the mystery that enshrouded all, that my friends and I had been affected in a disquieting way; one felt oneself remiss in not studying in personal intercourse so singular and unique a personality who pointed to an earlier, long-past epoch.

So Goethe, who writes these lines, in his *Annalen und Jahrbücher* for 1805, captured the whole flavor of the rumors about that "problematic" man—rumors nourished by Beireis himself, not without design, by stories ending in mystery and designed to whet the curiosity of hearers.

Beireis was born in 1730 and attended the *Gymnasium*, very reluctantly according to family traditions, which declare that he was nevertheless a favorite of the teacher and always at the head of his class. He was a prodigy, a very devil of a fellow, who could always manage to get through, though some thought it was in an uncanny manner. When a youth is lazy because he has no ambition to shine in school, despite his talents, that is not an unpleasing trait. But when one is indolent and yet, hardly seeming to wish it, reaches the top of the class, it is easy to suppose that supernatural forces are at work; and his companions admired him rather more as a wizard than for his scholastic honors.

In Beireis' career the suspicion of magic was ever close at hand. He studied at Jena in 1750 and, while a student, laid a good deal of stress on physical training; he was a good horseman, a brilliant fencer, and continued to steel his muscles and strengthen his body until he was well advanced in years. As a student of medicine, he evinced a taste for alchemy. At the age of twenty-three years, Beireis set out upon a journey, poor as a church mouse; three years later he came back enormously



rich. Riches transformed him into the mysterious and problematic man he was thenceforth to remain. Perhaps the means by which he had acquired his fortune were not free from magic, as his moralizing neighbors whispered, but if he had dabbled in the uncanny, he was at least canny enough to buy a feudal estate at once. He was supposed to have traveled in Spain, France, Holland, Italy, and Egypt. Nothing definite is ascertainable in all this, since he himself was unwilling to discuss these travels, or if he did so, it was in words that instead of casting light upon them but deepened the mystery. Skeptics were struck by the linguistic shortcomings of the supposedly experienced voyager, but, on the other hand, these were made good by his knowledge of places and people, revealed in delightful little anecdotes which he knew well how to spin out and set in circulation. In Versailles, so he once related, he had bought a pair of lace cuffs that were too expensive for the King of France. "But, Herr Hofrat, where are they now?" "Look you, Mademoiselle, I was recently bidden to the Duke's to dine, and I had put on the lace cuffs. One has to go past the menagerie. I was tempted to play with the monkeys. One of these naughty creatures tore off one of the cuffs, and, in a rage, I threw the other at his head."

His travels were not the only mystery about this problematic man; there was also gossip that he practiced alchemy. His wealth allowed him, at the age of twenty-six, to gratify every whim; he was free and independent. The rumor that Beireis knew how to make gold naturally spread. He did not confirm it, nor did he deny it, but he knew how to weave into his stories a hint that he spent many days and nights before the smelting oven, shunning sleep, in order to carry out secret operations. He also gave himself the airs of an adept, but when he was pressed with questions waved aside the reports that he had himself spread and played the university professor—which, in the meantime, he had become. "With reference to the expressed wish of Your Honor," he wrote, for example, "to learn from me means by which you can improve your position, I must submissively report to you that, six years ago, when I ruined two families by communicating such information, I made the firm resolve never again to discuss such matters even with the closest relatives. . . ." To all appearances, there were still plenty of folk who believed in old-fashioned alchemy in spite of all the "en-



lightenment" of Wiegleb. As we shall see, Beireis may not have taken the common gossip about alchemy too seriously, but he was an almost maniacal admirer of the new alchemy—science. It is very likely that when he was an impoverished student at Jena and studied alchemy, he did succeed in producing some dyestuffs, and that he sold the discovery while on his mysterious "journeys." During his whole life he remained in correspondence with dye factories; from this correspondence it appears that he was urged to undertake fresh experiments, and that in all probability this German possessor of industrial "secrets" was to be taken far more seriously than Cagliostro. He reached the goal toward which the latter only strove: the exploitation of budding industry through the sale of new processes.

He drew, however, not on his own power of invention but on Wiegleb's textbook of natural magic for the remarkable tricks by which he impressed the neighbors. Once when he was bidden to the table of the Duke of Braunschweig he appeared in a red coat; while they were at dinner, his garment became quite black and fell to pieces before the startled eyes of the guests, a sensation that caused them to tremble with horrified delight. The Bishop of Hildesheim, who was among the guests, found the wine in his glass had turned to vinegar. How all this can be "produced" is to be read in Wiegleb's instructive pages.

Before we discuss Beireis in his capacity as university professor and collector, it may be pointed out that he was not an isolated individual; typically German as he was, he represented a class of men who were confined to no one nation or race: those who exploited the vague general knowledge of natural science and technology, the cloud of mythology that enveloped magnetism and electricity. Among the great number of frauds in evidence at the turn of the century, we may select for its originality the "discovery" of a young American, Elisha Perkins, inventor of "metallic tractors." Perkins was a student at Yale University and practiced medicine in Norwich, Connecticut. His discovery that metals, even applied externally, had curative powers, dates from 1795; he constructed an instrument consisting of a pair of rods made from brass and iron, about three inches long, pointed at one end and blunt at the other, engraved with the name "Perkins' Patent Tractors." The inventor maintained that correct treatment with this instrument—a kind of



electrical massage—would cure any disease. He manufactured the marvelous instrument himself, claiming that one rod was made of copper, zinc, and gold, while the other was of iron in which silver and platinum were mingled; thus he could charge five guineas for an article that was hardly worth sixpence. In Norwich, where the community had probably formed a very exact picture of the qualifications of Mr. Perkins, he met only skepticism. And so the inventor doctor went to Philadelphia, where he was received with open arms and offered the chance to demonstrate his tractor treatment in hospitals. The members of Congress, then in session at Philadelphia, believed the wonderful reports that reached their ears about Perkins, and George Washington himself bought a pair of the tractors for his own use and that of his family. In February, 1796, the inventor took out a patent and sold large quantities of his superlative rods in every part of the United States. Only his colleagues in Norwich remained distrustful; indeed they accused Perkins of charlatanry and got him excluded from the Medical Society of Connecticut.

When the inventor observed that his fame was waning in America, he sent his son, Benjamin Douglas, to sell tractors in England. The son published a pamphlet praising his father's discovery and soon had great success. A whole new doctrine, Perkinism, arose. The caricaturist, Gillray (Fig. 64) shows the application of a pair of tractors, which were supposed to heal any burn within five minutes. The treatment is extracting a spark out of the flaming nose of a drunkard; presumably the nose will eventually be restored to its original shape. But England did not laugh; on the contrary, a "Perkins' Institute and Dispensary" for the poor was founded and the Royal Society accepted the discovery. A modest practicing doctor of Bath, however, Dr. John Maygarth, harbored certain doubts; together with a friend, Dr. Falconer, he produced tractors of wood that looked exactly like those of metal. The two sent the wooden imitations to various well-known physicians, who proceeded to publish the amazing results obtained with them. Then the two friends laid their cards on the table. Benjamin Douglas had to leave England, but he brought home the good round sum of fifty thousand dollars.

The fortune of the German humbug, Beireis, was probably



much less than that achieved by the tremendous tractor swindle in Anglo-Saxon countries. Much more secretive and shamefaced was Beireis' collection of interest on his capital, which, at his wish, was paid out by the banker in gold bars. While still young, Beireis had become Professor of Philosophy and Medicine in



64. The application of "metallic tractors," an invention of the American quack, Elisha Perkins. The English caricaturist, James Gillray, shows the treatment of a drunkard's swollen nose.

the little university town of Helmstedt; here he bought a fine, large house with a garden and indulged his collector's mania. From the very first he had made a sensation in that academic atmosphere, as may be readily understood from Heister's vivid picture of the life led by his colleagues:

The savants were completely separated from other classes; until far into the eighteenth century in Leipzig—and probably in most universities—a full professor had not the remotest intercourse



with a Master of Arts or an Extraordinary Professor, since higher education was a rarity among the latter. All connecting links between science and popular life were lacking. There was no thought of popular journals, pamphlets, lectures. . . . German works were reviewed in Latin. Theologians considered the reading of newspapers unsuited to the dignity of their cloth. An academician was then, as a man, harmless as a child; as a priest of science, he was immeasurably haughty; in a literary quarrel, he was coarse as a clodhopper. The people looked up to the bearers of science with awe, and from a great distance.

Into the musty atmosphere of these unworldly gentlemen burst Beireis, a wealthy young man, dressed with great care, who went in and out of princely houses in a familiar manner, and was in constant communication with the world of industry which, to his associates, seemed like another planet. Beireis had a cosmopolitan gallantry and formed relations with a young widow, Frau Kabinettsrat Glaser. Moreover, he delivered his lectures extempore and—crowning innovation!—wore no wig! No doubt the effect he produced was as great as that of the innovator in the engraving (Fig. 65) from the *Charlatanry of the Learned since Mencken*. Here we see the innovator striding on stilts, beaming and free, hardly hindered in his swinging gait by the supports, elevated above the heads of the worried, bewigged professors, fools, and masked revelers—the man without a wig. In the foreground, Wisdom is endeavoring vainly to light a fire in the head of a savant with her torch.

“Now comes the man in question,” one student would write to another on little slips of paper when the wigless Beireis would ascend the lecture platform. Through the sensation that he created, Beireis had at once produced a difference of opinion—propaganda, that is—around his person. But peculiarly enough, he kept the same methods of exciting attention all his life. In time his contemporaries also doffed their wigs, but they went on to cut their hair short; not so Beireis, who clung to his queue. Beireis was an innovator, frozen in his first innovation. When Goethe visited him, four years before his death, the eighty-five-year old man was still proud of his coiffure:

He drew attention to his headdress, showing how, thanks to it, he could be ready for such business [his calls] by day or night,

and always appear with the same dignity. He wore, that is, roll-like curls, fixed in horizontal position with pins, solidly pitched over



65. *Frontispiece from Über die Charlatanerie der Gelehrten seit Mencken. Leipzig, 1791.*

both ears. The forehead was adorned with a toupé, and all was rigid, smooth, and thickly powdered. He had himself made ready every evening like this, he said, and went to bed with his hair bound



up; at whatever hour he might then be called to a patient, he would appear as respectable as if he came directly from a ball.

In 1759, as a young professor, Beireis had worn a blue-gray, wide-skirted coat without a collar, a white neckband fastened with a silver buckle, stockings of white silk, shoes with silver buckles, and a *chapeau-bas* covered over with wax cloth; he carried a cane with a handsome knob. In 1806, when he opened his door to officers of the French Army of Occupation, he wore the same costume unaltered; and the soldiers shrank back from the old man as though he were a ghost from an age long past.

Not only by his outward appearance, had Beireis created a sensation in Helmstedt; his knowledge in the field of natural sciences, a little-tilled area in this humanistic university, had been astonishing. He was certainly a good doctor, willing to make sacrifices, eager to keep the "life machine" that so interested him in good running order; hence he had a large practice and grateful patients. But like a mountebank he boasted that no man could educate such good doctors as he, and, comparing a pamphlet of his own to a book by Zimmermann, he bragged: "When they have read that elegant book, however, they will be convinced that it cannot be compared to my little pamphlet either in doctrine or deductions." But medicine no longer offered adequate foundation for modern charlatanry, and Beireis was forced to turn his attentions to another sphere. Being rich, he formed a large collection of instruments, natural rarities, jewels, anatomical exhibits, coins, pictures, and—automata. At first this appeared to be simple delight in displaying his own wealth, which contrasted strangely with his penurious way of living. At midday he hastily swallowed some old biscuits or cake and a few turnips and in the evening had a watery soup; his only weakness was for sweet things. He even dipped into his Rhine wine little pieces of sugar, which at that time were ordinarily nibbled dry. But though he led so frugal a life, for formal occasions he clothed himself in waistcoats of white satin; his jabots were made of the costliest laces, and his buttons and buckles were of diamonds, his shoes of cordovan leather. He wore two golden watch chains and omitted gloves in order to display the diamond rings on both hands, of which each was worth a hundred ducats. Court Councillor Beireis got himself up like a precious museum



piece, and loved nothing more, unless it was to display his museum.

A visitor would be apt to hear much about precious jewels he had manufactured himself, and vague intimations of alchemistic secrets; he might be told about a diamond of 6,400 carats which the Emperor of China had pawned to Beireis. That this collector was primarily an exhibitor was remarked by Goethe immediately: "His manner of showing the pictures was strange enough, and seemed to some extent intentional; for they were not hung on the broad bright walls of his upper story, for instance, where they could have been enjoyed side by side; instead they stood rather than hung in his bedroom in layers around the big canopy bed, from whence, declining all assistance, he fetched them himself." While he displayed the pictures, Beireis continued to brag, and vaunted the artistic merits of, for instance, a representation of a loaf of bread on the table of the disciples at Emmaus, which was so lifelike that a dog had barked at it. This boasting grew so annoying that Goethe's companion, Professor Wolf, lost patience and went away. "It was really gratifying to me," remarked Goethe, who thought the collector was animated solely by the wish to appear as "unique" in his possessions as in his person. Sighing, Goethe states: "One was quite stunned, as usually happens when something obviously untrue is confided as something to be taken for granted, under circumstances where one thinks neither self-deception nor impudence possible to such a degree."

But what was the collection of automata like? It is told of Beireis that, while a child, he was taken by his father to see the famous figures of Vaucanson, just then being shown in Germany; he exclaimed: "I must have those figures!" The father, if one may believe the legend, punished him for presumption, but the child stubbornly repeated: "I will own them!" The rich man fulfilled his childhood dream by buying the automata when, after many vicissitudes, they were offered for sale in 1785. He set them up in his damp garden pavilion and employed the best mechanics to free them of rust and set them in order, putting a new cylinder in the flute player. The Councillor owned Vaucanson's drum beater and duck, besides the flute player, Hahn's calculating machine, Droz's magic clock, and a wooden figure of the devil; the latter could stick out its tongue and on it, to



the astonishment of beholders, Beireis would set a piece of wood afire. As the ruler of this magic domain, the Professor would give exhibitions before invited guests, much as Bragadino, two centuries before, had shown alchemistic processes before senators and *condottieri*. He had taken many hints from Wiegleb's textbooks, which he combined with the masterpieces of Vaucanson. Although Vaucanson had been a serious inventor who improved the loom, he was regarded as a playful hobby rider by the majority in that age, and Beireis also regarded his constructions as playthings, with which he was deeply in love; he had garments of gold and silver made for the drummer and the flute player and bragged about the costly materials to visitors. As a boy, he had wished to own the artificial figures; as an old man, he sought to dominate others through his ownership of them. When the Court Councillor, with a mysterious air, would boast that his flute player could play any piece at sight, or that he could make his magic clock stand still or strike, according to the *unvoiced* wish of his guest, by merely taking up a little magic wand of metal, probably a magnetized needle—it was hard to say whether he was enchanted by his machines or wished to enchant others; it was a curious mixture of possession, being possessed, and desire to possess and sway others.

His allusions to alchemy, the poetry he wrote in the style of the preceding (seventeenth) century, together with many another coquettish antiquarianism of the Professor have given rise to the view that he was not properly a figure of the 1700's but that, as Goethe formulated it, he was an anachronism belonging to "an earlier, past time." It is true that Beireis hardly seems typical of his age, but if he points to another, it would be not an earlier but a later period. With all his whims, he was an intelligent man, connected with banks and industry, a sport enthusiast, and, moreover, he outran his contemporaries in admiration for the machine and appreciation of the forces that resided in it. If this appreciation tempted him to be obsessed with springs and wheels, to mythologize and charlatanize the technical forces in his little realm of filigree-trimmed puppets, to which he was so enslaved by his devotion, he was, in all this, only a forerunner of a coming generation that was to show even more worship of the machine. E. T. A. Hoffmann makes his Ludwig say that the tricks of the Turk were only intended



to concentrate attention upon the figure, where the key of the secret was not to be found. So, too, the antiquarian traits of Beireis distract our gaze—have mountebanks ever done anything but divert spectators from their true goal by their harlequinades and feminine flute players? It can be objected that because Beireis was rich and did not seek further gain through the sale of any wares, he was not a charlatan. But the matter is not so simple. He was a charlatan of a higher species; his notions were complicated, since he did not think merely of profit; he felt himself a pathfinder for the machine, helping it toward that universal power which he foresaw it must attain. Those who have served this power have never despised the arts of the charlatan when it came to misleading public opinion. Such arts were employed to inspire in mankind the delusion that the masses would be liberated through mechanical forces, although there was no intention of freeing these same masses; and the very men who spread the delusion were releasing forces that were to enslave mankind.

Difficult as it is to discern Beireis' half-unconscious intentions, they may be guessed from the reactions of his visitors. Goethe laid little stress upon the collection of automata, for he was not interested in it; he merely noted in passing that the figures were now rusted and decayed (for the Councillor had grown old and neglected them). His host, who may have realized that this visitor was immune to mechanical marvels, invented a dramatic story in order to avoid showing off the whole magnetic hocus-pocus. Goethe retells this tale:

The magic oracle had become silent; Beireis had sworn never to wind up again this obedient clock which would follow his commands at a distance, now stop and now run. An officer who had been called a liar as he was relating his account of this miracle was said to have been stabbed in a duel; and since that time, he [Beireis] was firmly determined never to expose his admirers to such dangers, nor to incite nonbelievers to such hasty deeds of violence.

Goethe shook his head over the old man's fancy and smiled at his high valuation of such half-rusty things, "as though the higher technology had not brought out significant novelties since that time." But though Goethe could not feel the symbolism which these automata held for the curious, sugar-nibbling ancient,



another writer, somewhat later, who set out to ridicule Councillor Beireis, succumbed to their attraction. The Romantic poet, Achim von Arnim, devotes the whole ninth chapter of his *Countess Dolores* to the odd character of the Helmstedt Professor.



66. *Jacques Vaucanson (1709–82), the renowned inventor of automata, tinkering with an automaton worked by a clock.*

*Nineteenth-century lithograph, after a contemporary drawing.*

His portrayal reproduces the atmosphere excellently, although without the artistic power wielded by Hoffmann. With the irony of a Romantic, who views life from a detached and relativist point of view, Von Arnim observed the exhibitionism of Beireis.

Where Goethe's judgment is hard, Arnim's is pointed; where Goethe passes by without interest, the latter pauses, listening to the "lively and fearful" sound of the rasping wheels; he wanders through the Professor's house, musing over the nature of these mechanical men: are they lifeless or animated by some enigmatic spirit? He belonged to a transition generation that still wished to regard the new mechanical forces ironically but had nevertheless been caught by their riddle.

Arnim made his Count alight one evening in Helmstedt. "Only now did the Count remember that he was come unawares into the atmosphere of a wonder worker who for fifty years had given everyone much to guess at even though this half century had totally rejected miracles and riddles. Even if he cannot help me, he thought to himself, still I am here a 'Riddle among Riddles.' " He had himself guided by a servant to the house of the wonder worker: "The servant knocked three times on the door; a man in fine black clothes, wearing an oddly stiff, white wig of spun glass, having a broad brow, with deep gray, friendly eyes, and all his fingers encumbered with magnificent rings, asked what we wished." Hospitable, the Professor invited the strangers in, but excused himself, as he had to visit a patient, and withdrew.

The Count looked around him at the bright colorful room; on the ceiling above him hung, instead of chandeliers, a very artistic orrery, in which the sun shone with a strange brilliance; into all the edges of the mirror were inserted letters and poems of praise from persons who had been helped by the Doctor; on one side stood a clock in the shape of an urn on a tombstone, and around it moved beautiful maidens representing the hours. This clock made ready to strike, when a skeleton stepped forth from the wall and with its bony hand struck the seventh hour upon the ringing urn; a metal bird, which appeared to slumber upon the urn, flapped its wings and sang an evening song; the whole room rang as the quivering strings which went out from this clock set in motion a great jingling, rustling, and singing. Now all was quite still, but the skeleton had not disappeared; it drew near to a counting machine that stood near by on the table; the wheels groaned fearfully in the round box, finally grew still, and the skeleton dis-



appeared. The Count now looked at the counting machine and found there the number twenty-six; it was his own age and he laughed at the coincidence; yet he was anxious in the now darkening room; it was the hour of twilight, of a double illumination, when a haziness of vision easily communicates its mystery to the inner sensibilities.

Arnim composed this sketch of the wonder worker of Helmstedt with the clear intention of writing persiflage, but the object he depicted proved stronger than the painter. Goethe had simply thundered against the "tortures of unreason" that had been inflicted upon him. Arnim was caught against his will by the cunningly disguised poetry of the machines. The twilight had too entrancing an aesthetic charm for him to resist. This is shown in the continuation of the Count's experiences:

He stepped out of the small garden into a large pavilion. . . . In the middle, over an iron lattice, hung a little glass box out of which protruded four silver trumpets. The box hung by a thin wire; upon one side stood a life-size figure that carried a flute in its hand; upon the other side a metal duck swam in a pond of quicksilver. He still felt under the painful impression of being quite strange and alone in the society of unfeeling machines, which, made by man, could yet easily obtain the mastery over man. He said aloud and challengingly: Play, Flute Player, if you can!—The flute player immediately set his flute to his lips and played concertos, somewhat stiffly and awkwardly indeed, but very artistically, while the duck merrily splashed in the water and ate greedily from the grains which lay by the edge. The Count pressed his hands to his eyes and cried in amazement: "Who listens here, who can be heard, am I mad or is the whole thing unreal?" A tender feminine voice answered him: "Mad are we all, I can hear you, you can hear me."

After this answer, the Count turned again to the flute player, which now produced a song. Its last verse ran:

Herrschen nicht und auch nicht dienen,  
Zweifel war mein Weltgeschick,  
Nur beschwören, nicht verdienen,  
Lässt sich jedes Götterglück.

(My destiny in the world was neither to govern nor to serve; it was to doubt; every gift of the gods may be conjured up, it cannot be earned.)

The possibility of conjuring up happiness, the ultimate goal of all the charlatan's promises, here recurs in the mouth of a singing machine, the siren of a new age. The further searches of the Count then show him that the girl and the flute player are concealed in a little back room, and that they speak and sing through a kind of speaking tube. They confide their stories to him and—that is the most genuine and beautiful conception of the Romantic writer—the miraculous is suddenly inclosed in the fate of human beings; the machines recede and their importance and effect grow pale beside those of living characters. Since the Romantics were shaken in their feeling of security toward life and the world, they perhaps appeared unripe beside Goethe's mellowness, doubters beside his serenity; but they also had more sensitive nerves than he for the storm signals of the threatening world upheaval of the mechanical revolution. "Machines that are made by man may easily win mastery over man . . ."

How did the ruler of this magic realm of artificial men impress others? Goethe pictures him: "Beireis enlivened every occasion by his gay presence. Not tall, well-built and agile, the legends of his fencing skill may well be believed; an incredibly high and vaulted forehead, quite out of proportion with the lower and finely contracted parts, indicated a man of singular spiritual force." It seems to us, however, that in the portrait (Fig. 67) the compressed lips of the toothless mouth betray a great deal of envious malice. And in fact, there were many incidents which reveal a malicious pettiness in Beireis' character. He spoke of Leibnitz and Lavoisier in a spiteful manner, depreciating their achievements; in a speech on the art of engraving, he maintained that Michelangelo had had destroyed all the pictures and engravings of Dürer, an invention so senseless that it sheds light on the character of the inventor. The woman he loved, that elegant widow, had betrayed him; his dog called his attention to the fact by barking, so that he could surprise his rival in the chamber of Frau Kabinettsrat. The dog received an honored grave; Beireis remained a bachelor



and all the warmth of his devotion to the faithless one was turned to a great love of dogs. All these are traits that indicate the charlatan, who, as we have already seen, is characterized by intolerance and excessive vanity. A further symptom was the bragging of the Professor about his record achievements: he



67. *Gottfried Christoph Beireis (1730–1809), a charlatan and professor in the university at Helmstedt. The ducal porcelain factory in Braunschweig produced statuettes representing the popular and mystery-enshrouded figure of Beireis.*

could lecture in class for fourteen hours a day. According to Heister: "Nature had endowed him with a powerful chest. He could speak for hours without weariness and refreshed himself only now and then with a piece of sugar." Beireis appears to have been an artist in inventing and relating stories and legends about his own person—another evidence of charlatanry. Goethe



was quick to guess at the prefabricated origin of much that he heard about the strange man; one story told him about Beireis appeared clearly "a legend invented in the style and taste of the old wonder worker." After hearing many accounts from other persons, he listened to the versions told by the aged Professor himself during a walk back from the estate of Count von Veltheim:

On the way back . . . we got to hear about many of the feats of the old magician who accompanied us. Now we heard from his own mouth stories of his earlier days that had already reached our ears as traditions handed down from that time; but, looked at closely, there was a noticeable monotony in the legends of this holy man. As a boy he had shown youthful courage and resolution, as a student he was quick to defend himself in academic quarrels, exhibiting dexterity with the foil, artful horsemanship, and other excellent physical qualities, courage and agility, strength and endurance, steadiness and energy; all this lay far behind in a dim past; the three years of travel remained mysterious, and many another thing in his recital, and certainly in the explanations, was indefinite.

With the clear differentiation between Beireis' recital and his explanations, and the remark that so much remained inconclusive in the latter, Goethe touched upon that aspect of the magician's life which bordered on charlatanry. The same monotony that so struck Goethe in these legends may be found in the autobiographical reminiscences of other charlatans. As all impostors tried to produce anecdotes to impress a certain kind of audience, they gradually built up a successful but stereotyped scheme; details might be changed, little fashionable flourishes might be added, but the structure of the tale remained the same. Certainly it was poor in variety, but as the audience in all centuries was composed of the same kinds of evil, weak, and ignorant individuals, no really remarkable invention was called for. Beireis was a quack who had become a bureaucrat and so did not feel the threat of the gallows, as did his predecessors; but though the type of charlatan had changed, the character of his dupes did not show a hair's breadth of difference in reaction, as compared to the devoted followers of earlier impostors. Goethe summed it up in remarking of Beireis:



Since the striking result of his life and career seemed to be an immense collection of treasures, an inestimable fortune, he could never want in the least for believers and venerators. To the masses, these are a kind of household divinity to which their eyes are drawn with awe and desire. And if such possessions are not inherited or acquired in a familiar way, but in secrecy, one is ready, where so much is dark, to admit everything else that seems strange; one lets him carry on his fairy-tale existence for a mass of coined gold and silver gives weight and esteem even to the untrue. . . .

The actual possession of treasure is, however, not enough. It must be magnified by skilful lies, by bragging and well-staged exhibitions in order to make it effective, to lend it the splendor that shimmers around the altars of the household divinities, money and pleasure, in the habitation of the charlatans. And so we are led back by our observations to the central problem: the great and baleful might of the charlatan is contained in the amalgamation of truth and the lie to form a substitute for truth. We may close this chapter with the wisdom of Goethe's words on this marriage of truth and falsehood:

. . . After all this, there is the moral element to be contemplated: wherein and whereupon it has acted; I mean the time, the real sense, the need of the same. The communications of the world's inhabitants were not so speedy as they are today, and it was still possible for someone to take up his residence in a distant spot, like Swedenborg, or in a narrow university town, like Beireis, where he would always find the best opportunity to enshroud himself in a mysterious darkness, conjure up spirits and work upon the philosophers' stone. Have we not seen how Cagliostro, in recent times, covered great distances with rapidity, played his tricks by turns in the south, north, and west, and everywhere could find followers? Is it saying too much, then, to declare that a certain superstitious belief in demoniacal men will never cease, yes, that in every age there will be found a locality where the truth that is problematical, the truth which in theory we alone respect, can in practice pair itself comfortably with the lie?





## CONCLUSION





## Conclusion

THE power of the charlatan is based not upon the direct lie but upon falsification; he perverts words sacrilegiously, steals away their genuine content from truth and knowledge. Like the "superstitious belief in demoniacal men," of which Goethe spoke, his power will not wane so long as he can find so many over-credulous persons, who are indeed positive that they hate and shun lies but nevertheless shrink from experiencing the whole truth; the victims of the charlatan prefer to watch the exciting and variegated pictures of the half-truth with amazed and believing eyes.

Such ready believers are unbelievers according to the Scriptures. "We walk by faith, not by sight," said Christ (II Cor. II. 5, 7), and only those who shut their eyes to the misleading sights of this world are prepared to receive His truth. In the Gospel of St. John (XX. 27-29) it is related that Thomas found himself unable to accept the Master without the evidence of his senses; Christ bade him stretch out his hand:

Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.

And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God.

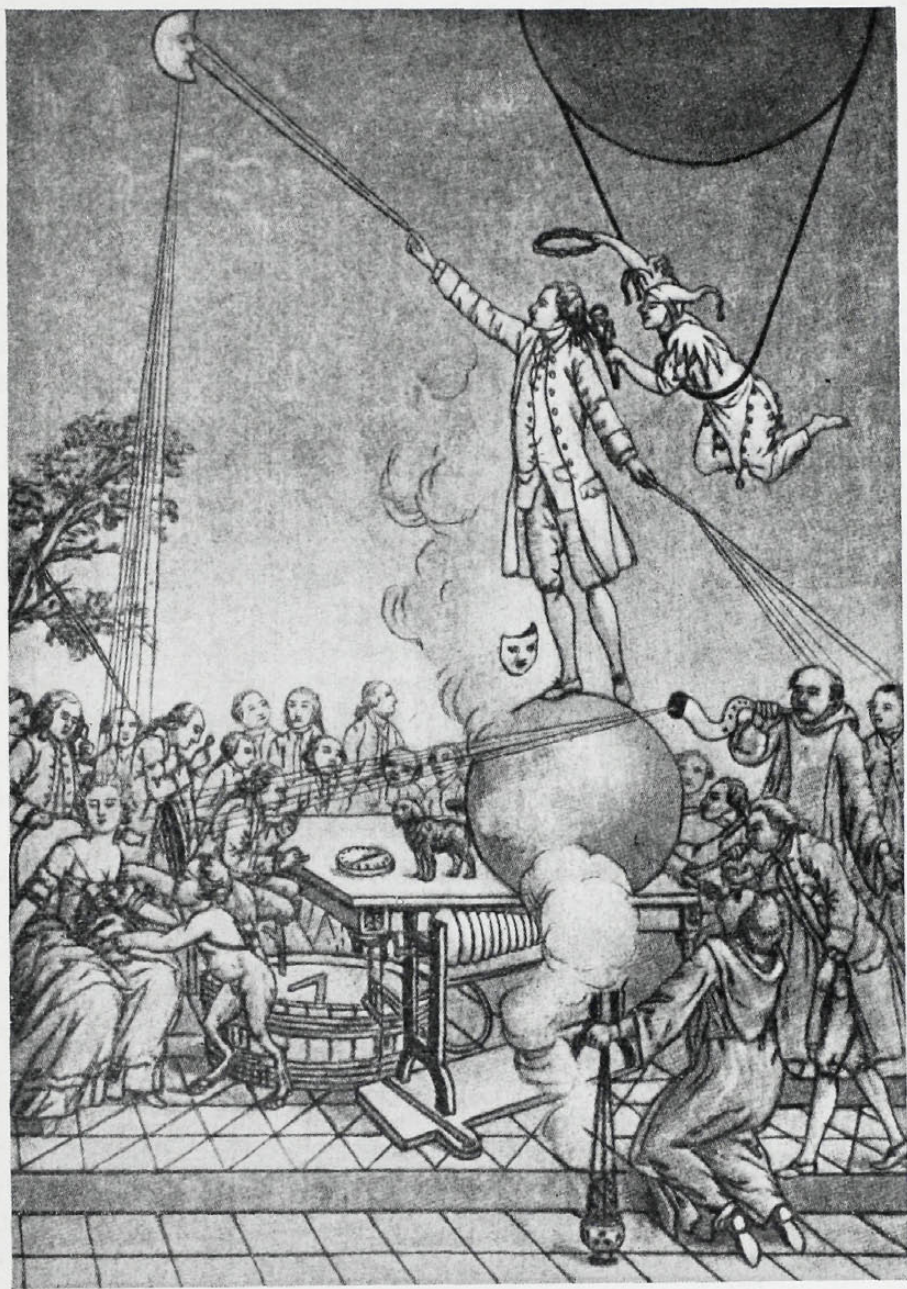
Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

Thomas became known to all future times as "doubting Thomas" because he believed only after he had seen the wonder and felt it with his fingers. The "unbelieving" believers of the charlatan likewise demand prodigies; they fly like fluttering moths in the rays of their wonder worker. They long to see, to hear, and to feel, and the wizard who leads them is very well aware of this demand; he offers a continuous exhibition of tangible marvels, urging his dupes to come and take part, to open their eyes and watch his nimble hands. Because he perpetually feeds the victims on spectacles and captivating sounds, they

believe him and believe in him. With their senses satisfied, they can lull themselves into a feeling of security. They must, however, defend that fallacious "proof" against every critical attempt at an examination, trembling lest the happiness promised and assured to them should be destroyed by some hateful, because also tangible, counterevidence. They flee from the test ever deeper into illusion. And so it comes about that the followers of the charlatan are insistent upon receiving fresh and tangible proofs of his power and success every day, and yet, at the same time, hate and fear nothing so much as any circumstantial evidence that might dispel their belief. They have put their faith in him who knows best how to nourish illusion; the charlatan, who has learned the art of conjuring up chimerical visions from his colleague, the juggler and magician, has also discovered how easy it is to satisfy his dupes' desires. He has only to keep on showing them pictures of the half-truth, so vividly presented as to convince them that they have already experienced and enjoyed the fulfillment of their dreams. When men have once been intoxicated by illusion, they tend to despise not only the counterproof that might prick the bubble but all tangible proof as such, thereafter. Not because they "have not seen, and yet have believed," but because they believe and will not see. The charlatan is thus able to appease the only apparently contradictory demands of the "unbelieving believers" who follow him.

The first picture in this book represents Luigi Pergola (Fig. 1), the mountebank with a secret panacea for sale; in the last, a satirical aquatint of the eighteenth century, we see the splendid courtier charlatan accompanied by Fame and Folly (Fig. 68). Between the two is comprised the whole development of the word "charlatan," from a simple professional designation to a figurative term of the widest general application. Upon the balloon of Fame, which the admiring dupes are so busily filling with air, the cavalier impostor is ascending to the moon. In the clouds of incense that rise from burners the mask of Fame is visible. Folly herself, with cap and bells, hangs in the ropes of the aerial windbag. Grown greedy through a vision of the fantastic possibilities opened by modern discoveries, Folly seeks to take advantage of the latest technical innovations. At the left, several modish cavaliers are gazing through lorgnettes at the newest discovery, a *perpetuum mobile* in the shape of a clock





68. *Fame and folly in the service of the charlatan's  
renown.*

*An Italian satiric aquatint from the eighteenth century.*



—a poodle is their companion in curiosity. In the foreground sits a lady, significantly struck by the cool rays of the moon, which connect her with the charlatan and at the same time by the sound of the trumpets that announce his fame. A cupid with goat's feet draws an arrow from his quiver and wounds the fair one.

This picture represents the delirious atmosphere of the age of modern invention. The burden of knowledge, so rapidly acquired, had become too great; a generation oppressed by the acceleration of tempo and accumulation of facts was endeavoring to shake off its fears by mythologizing the whole process. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the period with which this study closes, we already find in embryo many of the elements of charlatanry that were to unfold in succeeding years.

If the might of the charlatan rested upon a simple deception instead of upon distortion of the truth, it would be easier to recognize and expose him. The deceiver replaces "yes" by a "no," truth by a lie; and if one succeeds in stripping this mask from him, his falsehood becomes visible to all. The charlatan offers for a "yes" not a "no" but a substitute for "yes"; when he is unmasked, one may discover but another mystery, an ape head, as we see in the frontispiece of the "Market Crier Unmasked." Even this ape imitates knowledge and truth deceptively. Thus exposure can do little against the clever swindler, the skilful illusionist, a fact made abundantly clear by the doctors, who failed, with all their clear expositions, to extirpate quackery. Especially when he is sick, man becomes a ready prey to the charlatan. Physical pain plunges him into despair, makes him weak and credulous before the boundless promises of the wonder worker, who, for his part, does not scruple to abuse weakness and need. The true physician is believed only by those who are armed against illusion so well that, even in grave illness, they would not surrender to the artist in delusion. As Dr. Whitlock many generations ago observed, the need is for more patients able to preserve "*mens sana in corpore insano*"—"sound judgment in unsound bodies."

Like the individual man, so mankind himself, in the periods of weakness and fever that punctuate its history, falls victim again and again to the charlatan; it puts faith in the healers who pretend to relieve the miseries of their time with quick and



simple formulas, as that old English quack, of whom Addison tells, offered pills against earthquakes. "The belief in demoniacal men" is never so strong as when a man or mankind is enfeebled. And whether tried by physical sufferings or assailed by all the manifold ills that compose human fate, only a few are beyond the reach of temptation, fully armed against the charlatan. This small minority of the immune prefers to gaze, not upon the swindlers of their epoch, but, with pity and horrified amazement, upon their fellow men, as Hieronymus Bosch depicted them long ago.

Against the quack, the sober and learned exposition of the physician avails little. The immune do not need it, for even without warnings from the expert they can look behind the mountebank's mask. And the credulous masses of "believers" are often not convinced by the unveiling of their wonder worker, their "Eternal Apollo"—his face, even without disguise, appears fascinating. They *want* to believe, and would only hate the argumentative expert who tried to injure the object of their faith. Nor are the merely erudite always fitted for the task. The doctors who tried to expose Leonhard Thurneisser, the alchemist and fisher for jewels, were distinguished from the swindler by their diplomas, but not sufficiently by their natures; they explained his triumphs as the work of the devil, thus confirming instead of destroying his specious triumph. They left the essence of charlatanry unassailed. Never yet has expert knowledge alone sufficed; the efforts of physicians and others to cure mankind of its more general delusions, by campaigning against individual charlatans, were crowned with success only when they were supported by the convincing force of a superior personality.

In the course of our investigations we have encountered only a few persons who remained entirely unimpressed by the unfolding might of the charlatan. The immune were always in the minority, and yet in the end they succeeded in shaking that magic spell. Not through zeal in "exposing" did they compel the deceived and half deceived to stop and reconsider, but because they molded their own lives, their every action, into visible evidence of a world of values in which a rogue, however powerful, remains but a rogue. This was the achievement of Austria's Empress, the great Maria Theresa, and of Paolo Sarpi, the

cool yet spiritual Roman. Both fought silently and yet effectively against the charlatans of their day, carrying conviction even though they refrained from open denunciation of the popular frenzy.

Seldom indeed did the effective denial of charlatanic principles come—as with Sarpi—from the caste of scholars, and yet more rarely—as in the case of Maria Theresa—from the heights of a throne. Most frequently it was to be found among the small minority of incorruptible men and women who lived, unknown and even avoided, as though *they* were the carriers of infection, among the herd of the “believers.” They had no use for the charlatan and his balloon; his blandishments passed them by, for they stood with both feet on the solid earth and were never tempted to soar with the vast gaseous bag of the impostor. Yet they did not overestimate earthly pleasures and visions; if they shunned the painter of false visions, it was not because they despised imagination but because they knew the difference between a dangerous illusion and that noble creative fancy which, as the poet Von Hofmannsthal wrote, is able “to reshape Reality into a new and higher form of existence.” And it was these solitary individuals, often misunderstood by their fellows, who were called on to lead the fight against the power of the charlatan.



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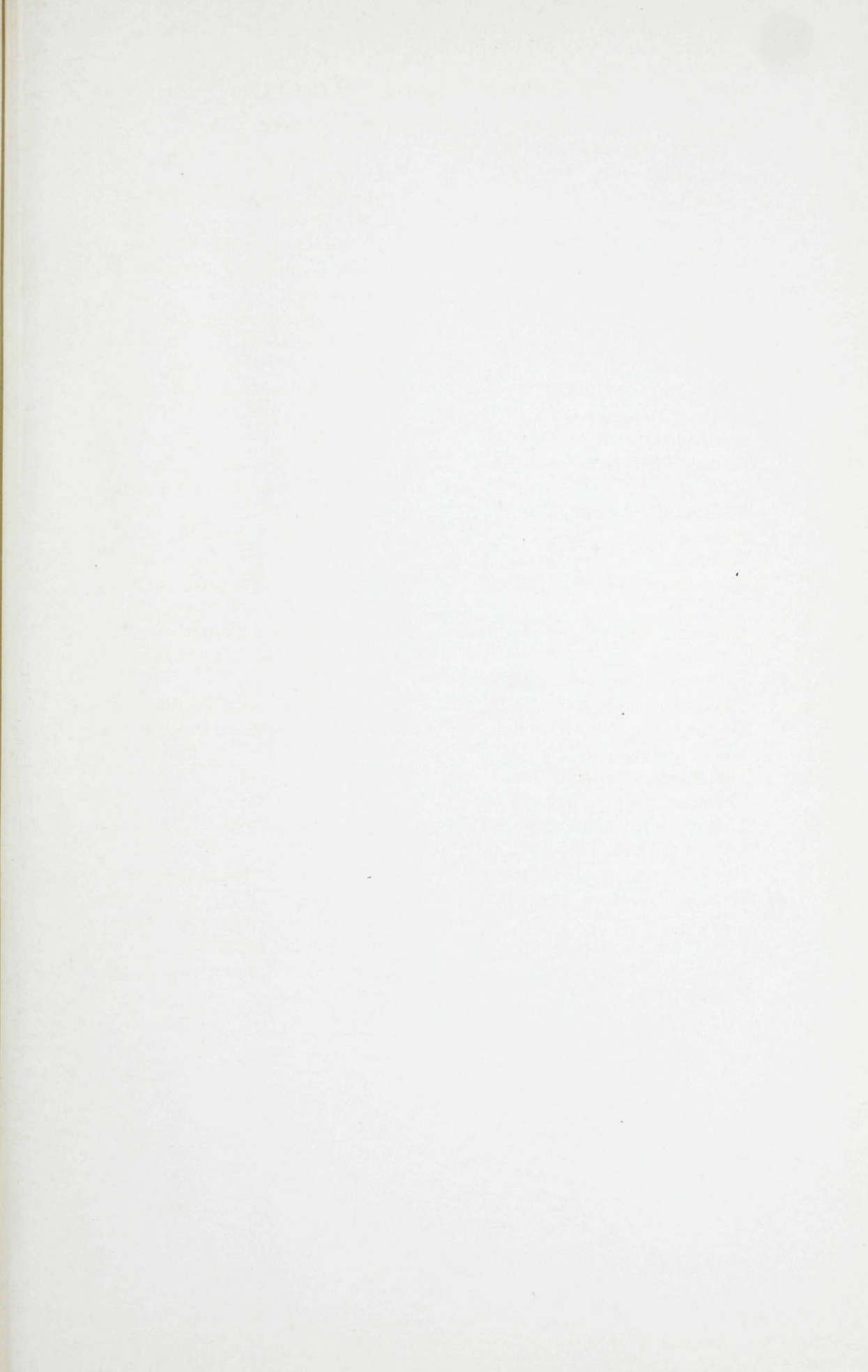
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